読者（ぼく）と主人公（かのじょ）と二人のこれから

＊＊＊ボクトカノジョトフタリノコレカラ＊＊＊

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Illustrations

読者（ぼく）と主人公（かのじょ）と二人のこれから

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「――柊時子です」
「――松庵中学出身、趣味は読書です。
姉が一人います。
中学では文芸部に入っていました」
――柊時子（ひいらぎときこ）
――トキコだ。トキコがいる。
――小説の中の彼女が、
俺の目の前に現れた。
――細野晃（ほそのあきら）

広尾修司（ひろおしゅうじ）
「俺はこんなことじゃないかって思ってたけどね」
須藤伊津佳（すどういつか）
「もー！　なんで返事しないのよ！　心配したじゃない！」

柊ところ
―ひいらぎところ―
「すまない、呼び出してしまって。
一度会っておきたかったんだ」

「……わたしが、『彼女』になるけど」
「――」
俺と柊の関係が、
取り返しの付かない形で
変えられていく。
そして、柊は。
目の前の終時子は、
致命的な一言を俺に告げた。

だから、わたしの初恋は――

読者（ぼく）と主人公（かのじょ）と二人のこれから

岬鷺宮
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Prologue

Tokiko expressed herself through the pages of the book that I held in my hands.

—*And when the clouds are packed together so tightly that the rays of the sun can't penetrate through them, the air that is filled with the fresh scent of the moist soil, and the faint sound of thunder that can be heard far away, it feels even better.*

During such days, the classroom that is illuminated by the fluorescent lights feels like a shelter completely isolated from the world.

Even the usually distant classmates and the teacher who dispassionately taught as they stood on the platform felt akin to comrades aboard the same ark, giving a sort of nostalgic and reassuring feeling.

Yeah.

I raised my face from the book and unintentionally spoke.

I get it. Sometimes, I get the same feeling *Tokiko* does.

I only took this book on a whim.

On my way back from school during junior high, I caught sight of the cover of this one amongst the books lined up in the bookstore in front of the station, and it piqued my interest.

An illustration of a girl standing in her school uniform with a light coloured background. The title was quite dull: “14 Years Old”. I didn’t remember seeing Hiiragi Tokoro, the name of the author, anywhere before.

However, the simple design, the clumsiness including the lack of appeal, and the listless expression of the girl on the cover strangely attracted me.

I’ll surely like this book.

I got a hunch that was closer to a revelation.

My curiosity was stimulated, I took the book and started reading on the spot.

And my hunch was right, it didn’t take long for me to be engrossed in “14 Years Old”.

──Only when I’m timid do I truly wish for the happiness of everyone. Be it the people I know or those I don’t, men or women, Japanese or non-Japanese, all the people living on this planet, I wish for their happiness.

──I don’t want to name anyone. If you call someone whom you had a neutral relationship with a “friend”, if you call faint good will “love”, then according to the mood, the conventions and the precedents, you’ll end up slightly attracted to these rails. We should become friend. It should be love. Even though it wasn’t our intention at first, we end up acting according to them.

──It seems like someone is directing a special good will toward me. Even if separated by a long distance, even if we won’t meet ever again, I want you to always think about me somewhere. If someone is feeling that, then there is nothing else that I desire.

When I find parts that are overlapping with myself, when it makes me think “I see”, or when I read an unexpected expression, each time my heart throbs strongly.

Then, a few minutes later where I stood reading.

——*I think this pain in my chest is my raison d’être.*

The instant I saw this line, I got goosebumps on my whole body.

——*”Happiness” is precious. However, just like how you’d feel a story that is only trying to move you unsatisfactory, just like how you’d get an uncomfortable feeling about events that are made just to make you create memories, I don’t think that a life where one only seeks “happiness” is beautiful.*

Those gain value in them because they are born after living the way each person thinks to be right.

And that’s why, I want to live beautifully.

Even if I end up turning my back to happiness at times, I still want to live beautifully, embracing my ideals, obstinacy and pain.

I’m the same.

I thought, as if struck by lightning.

“Someone” thinking like me is on the other side of these pages.

I closed the book, and jogged toward the register.

I couldn’t just read this book standing in the store.

The sofa in the living room, or my bed, anyway, I needed a calm place where I could read while ascertaining each and every page.

This book, “14 Years Old” is going to support my monotonous everyday.

I clearly felt this certain sensation in my hands.

——*This is the story of my everyday life, where nothing special happens.*

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 1 – Me I’m Not

I wanna go home.

It was currently a little over 11am and only homeroom was left after having finished the school entrance ceremony and the orientation about the high school life. We were waiting for the teacher responsible for our class, Miyamae High School First Year Class 7.

My classmates all around me were restless.

One was talking to a friend next to him, another was looking outside the window nervously, another was playing with his smartphone, and a guy was already even trying to get a girl’s attention.

Even if everyone looked different at a glance, you could notice a look of expectation on their faces.

Miyamae High is pretty famous for being loose with its rules.

Thus, there was a wide variety of people here, like having someone aiming for Tokyo University and one winning the national tournament for their club, while also having a blonde fashion model and even a girl aiming to be an idol in the same class.

I’m sure that my classmates too have their heart palpitating at the bright future awaiting them in their highly anticipated fun high school life.

As I was looking at them as if they were part of another world,

“Good morning!”

A young teacher with a bright expression entered the classroom and started homeroom.

“I’ll be the teacher in charge of this class, Nakaoka Ryuuta. I’m looking forward to this year with everyone!” said Nakaoka-sensei with an athlete-like tone, standing on top of the platform.

He seemed to be in the later half of his twenties. He was wearing a jacket that seemed to be just out of the laundry with not a single wrinkle on it, and he gave off the impression of a lively young man.

The next thing he said after his presentation as the teacher in charge,

“And now, it’s time for self-introductions!”

Was this.

“In order with the attendance number go in front of everyone, then say your name and the middle school you’re from, and… well, your hobbies or anything like that, just say a few words to everyone! There’s no time limit, so everyone can do what they like, but keep it reasonable. Well then, let’s start!”

The classroom got noisy with this development.

The guy with attendance number 1 stood up,

“Eeh, it’s too sudden―”

And went to the platform with a not so dissatisfied expression.

“Err, I’m Aimura Junji, from Momoi Middle School! Um, I did track and field there, and, err, I did pretty well in the district tournament! If you want my autograph I can give it to you later, so don’t hesitate to call out to me!”

The class laughed at his variety show performer-like tone.

But in my case, I felt uncomfortable in this harmonious ambiance.

I didn’t intend to get close to anyone here.

I wanted to keep the conversations and the committee work to the minimum, and I do not want to join a club either.

That’s why I didn’t care about the name, former school, hobbies or whatever else of my classmates.

“I’m Ikawa Ai! I’m from Igusa Middle School! I wasn’t in a clyub… haha, I bit my tongue. Anyway, I wasn’t in a club but──”

As attendance number 2 had started her presentation, I lowered my gaze at the book in my hand, “14 Years Old” as usual.

Written by Hiiragi Tokoro. The story of the clumsy literature girl *Tokiko*, living her life as she thinks about various things.

The moment I looked at the sentences that were written on the pages, my dim view brightened up. This A6 sized book was my salvation in my dull everyday life.

It’s been a year since I bought it in the bookstore in front of the station. I reread it so many times that the cover was worn out, the pages were wrinkled up and the spine had frayed spots. It was so worn out that it wouldn’t even be put in the 100 yen wagon of a second hand bookstore. But the feeling of having a comrade in this book didn’t fade away no matter how many times I read it.

“Takashima Ryuuji… From Kamiogi Middle School… Best regards…”

On the cover full of scratches was an easy to read font for the title, and the illustration of a girl in middle school.

Last spring, when I saw this cover in the bookstore, I felt strangely attracted to it.

Books you really come to like are just like that. The title is catchy, or the design stands out, either way they leave a rather strong impression on your mind that you can’t forget.

And in fact, once I started reading it I couldn't stop myself.

As I continued the story, I got deeply immersed into it.

So much that even after I had finished reading it on the same day, I started to reread it to be in *Tokiko*'s world a little bit longer.

"Nishio Keisuke is the name! I'm from Zenpukuji Middle School! We have only one high school life, so let's have fun!"

I turned the pages with my fingers.

The passing everyday of the protagonist, *Tokiko*.

You can almost say that "14 Years Old" doesn't have any ups or downs. No falling in love, no problems to confront, just *Tokiko* passing her everyday life in solitude while thinking about many things.

Tokiko anxiously thinking about the future while looking at the cloudy sky from the train.

Tokiko feeling like she won something after finding a novel surprisingly interesting even though she didn't like it before then.

Tokiko regretting to have cut her bangs in front of the mirror.

Tokiko crying alone after quarreling with her older sister.

I had a strange empathy for her thoughts, and what's more, I found them to be lovely.

In a way, you could say that "14 Years Old" was the story made from condensing the sensitivity and charm of a single girl, *Tokiko.*

I've been into books from the start. Since I was a child, I've been reading literature books in my house, and even now I still take a look at the ones that interest me in the bookstores.

But it was the first, and for now the last time I was so fascinated with a protagonist.

“I’m Nohara Yukari. I’m from Momoi Middle School. I wasn’t in a club, and I don’t plan to join one in high school either.”

However, the self-introductions advanced faster than I thought.

My name is Hosono Akira, so my attendance number is in the later half.

I thought I had time, but it was almost my turn.

After the sluggish girl who was currently on the platform, it’ll be the girl with a weak impression before me, and then me. I already decided what to say, so once it’s my turn I’ll quickly get done with it and then return to my seat. As long as I don’t make a blunder, I don’t really wish for anything else.

I don’t intend to become friends with anyone in this classroom. As long as I have this novel, as long as I have *Tokiko*, I’ll never feel bored.

I really thought like this.

That’s why,

“I’m Hiiragi Tokiko.”

The attendance number just before mine.

While thinking “She has the same name as *Tokiko*,” I looked up towards the platform and it felt like time had stopped.

“I’m from Shouan Middle School, and my hobby is reading. I have an older sister. In middle school I was in the literature club.”

Languid, almond-shaped, darkish eyes.

A bob cut, black hair and eyelashes that you can grasp the length of even at this distance.

A slender body wearing a brand new blazer not fitting to her, the sunlight shone lightly on her white porcelain-like skin, and her thin neck was like delicate glasswork.

Reflexively, I looked at the “14 Years Old”’s cover in my hand.

They look exactly the same.

The girl drawn on the illustration and the girl right in front of me looked exactly the same.

That wasn’t all. I looked at the platform again. An emerald green hair ornament matching with her pretty looks. A clear and beautiful voice. She stood straight with her gaze looking down.

I got a flashback about *Tokiko*’s own description in the book.

──The jade hair ornament I received seems to have been made during the start of the Showa era. It isn’t from some brand, it’s mine alone, and my treasure.

──A clear and dignified voice. Even if people praise it, i yearn for a different voice. A low voice, a husky voice, a hoarse voice. I’m sure such kinds of voices represent the life that their owner has lived.

──I’m standing in front of everyone in the classroom. Only the ones in front can see me. That’s why, at least, I must stand straight while enduring everyone’s stares.

What’s more, her family name is the same as the author of “14 Years Old”, Hiiragi. And thinking about it, the *Tokiko* in the novel had a sister and she

was also in the literature club…

No, let's drop the minor details.

More than anything, the presence of Hiiragi Tokiko, her somehow noble yet lonely aura, was exactly how I had imagined *Tokiko*.

Totally ignoring reason and common sense, I felt it.

It's Tokiko. Tokiko *is right here.*

The girl from the novel is right before my eyes.

My vision shook. I felt a strong sense of dizziness.

My sense of reality disappeared, and instead a strange sensation, as if I had entered into the world of stories, replaced it.

"…Please treat me well."

Said Hiiragi Tokiko, then she bowed slightly and went down from the platform.

Hands clapped for the twentieth or something time.

In this noise, Hiiragi Tokiko trotted to her seat as if heading towards a shelter from the rain.

"… Hey, next one!"

Hearing the teacher's voice, I came back to my senses.

Everyone was looking at me.

"…Ah, yes! I'm sorry!"

I hurriedly stood up and went towards the platform.

□

"And this week's travel on foot is at the Hida Mountains! Also called the little Kyoto, Hida is an old fashioned town full of charms. In the

previous location Mikami-san and Tsuchida-san had a little dispute, so how will the travel unfold——”

“The Hida Mountains, huh, how nostalgic, Honey,” said my father while watching the TV as he drunk beer.

Mom answered from the kitchen,

“The Hida Mountains? What about it?”

“It’s a TV show about a trip. We went there when we were students.”

“Ah, a TV show… But we went there? I don’t remember.”

“… How cruel. Though it’s true we went to many places…”

Twenty minutes from school on foot.

In my house just barely in Tokyo’s 23rd ward, my parents, me and our cat, Shishamo, were together in the living room.

Lying sprawled out on the sofa, I was remembering what had happened today.

Hiiragi Tokiko. The girl looking exactly like *Tokiko* from “14 Years Old”.

I was pretty confused, but thinking about it, it wasn’t something amazing.

It was simply an accidental resemblance.

We’re not in a fantasy world, and characters from stories can’t just appear in the real world.

It was by chance that they looked alike, and they had the same name. Just that was already a huge coincidence, but searching amongst all the girls of the same age in Japan, it wouldn’t be weird to find one.

In the first place, I’m not even sure I was calm enough when I looked at Hiiragi.

Tomorrow, if I look calmly at her, it's possible that they won't actually look that much alike.

"Good morning! I looked forward to coming to the Hida Mountains. I hope this time we will have a calm trip, hahaha, well then, let's go!"

"Ah, it's the Takayama Station. Look, Honey, I bought you a sarubobo here!"

"Err, really…?"

"Really! Look, here! On that corner! We presented each other a sarubobo for work fortune! Around the time we started job hunting!"

"Umm…"

"You really don't remember?… Even though your smile at that time is clearly etched in my memory…"

Dad dropped his shoulders, disappointed.

However, Mom suddenly made a face as if she had noticed something,

"… Umm? When we started job hunting?"

"Yeah, that's right. Just around the end of our third year…"

Speaking until there, Dad suddenly shut up.

Mom squinted her eyes and looked down on Dad.

"… You know, Dear, we met during an unofficial job offer party, right?"

"…"

"So that means that we didn't know each other during our third year, right?"

"…"

“Then, I wonder who is the one etched clearly in your memory?”

“… A-ahahah. Well, you know… err…”

“Seems like it was a really fun trip.”

“No, well… umm…”

Then Dad suddenly turned towards me,

“B-by the way, Akira! Today was, you know, your school entrance ceremony, right? So, how was it? Think everything will go well!?”

“What? School entrance ceremony?”

I involuntarily doubted what I had heard because of how badly he tried to change the subject.

“Yeah, that. Err, the next three years are important for your future! Studies, club or love or whatever, you should devote yourself entirely to them! Then, you should quickly start to think about your future──”

Whoa, that’s awful.

Even if you want to gloss over your error, there should be a better way to go about it. I’m sure even Dad doesn’t know what he’s talking about.

“Talking about the future, you’re going to get the right to vote soon, Akira! Young people complain that they don’t know about politics, so you need to start──”

He’s straying more and more off topic. I won’t have the right to vote for two more years, you know. You, what are you trying to do, Dad?

Then with good timing, my smartphone vibrated in my pocket.

“… Wait, someone’s calling.”

Stopping the conversation, I stood up and went to the hallway, my Dad imploring me to not go in the back.

Looking at the screen, “Call from Itsuka” was displayed.

… Sudou, huh. Not really someone I want to talk to, but it’s better than being involved in a married couple quarrel.

“Hello, you busy?”

Answering the call, I could hear a cheerful voice the moment I put the phone against my ear.

“No, no problem.”

“Great. So, how was your first day? How was your class?”

“Even if you ask me how they were…”

I thought about Hiiragi Tokiko for an instant, but,

“Nothing special, the usual,” I answered nonchalantly.

“I see. Well, that’s fine then. Just wondering if it went well for you.”

I’ve known Sudou Itsuka since primary school. We’ve been in the same class for nine years, and now, after entering Miyamae High, it was the first time we were separated.

She’s one of the two persons who worry about me since I had started to avoid people, so she calls me once in a while.

I’m sure she’s worried about me, who has isolated himself from people, in her own way. Even though I don’t want her to.

“Once things have settled down, let’s invite Shuuji and go play again together.”

“If I feel like it.”

“Even if you don’t feel like it, I’m going to invite you. That’s all, see ya.”

“Yeah, later.”

The call ended with this short reply.

I sighed, went to my room then threw my phone on my bed.

“Go play again together, huh.”

Just like my phone, I let myself fall on my bed, ruminating about these words.

How can she expect something from me?

Even though Sudou is the one who knows best the reason I don’t want to be involved with people.

□

The next morning.

Arriving barely on time in front of my classroom, I had a bad premonition hearing the noise on the other side of the door.

A few guys were talking. I think I’m hearing four or five people talking around the fourth row from the right entrance, so near to my seat.

… What a pain.

If there’s one using my seat I’ll have to ask him to move.

I want to live as quietly as possible, without having to talk to anyone. So having to call out to a classmate that early in the morning is seriously

annoying.

I opened the door dejectedly,

“Oh, you’re from Kamiogi’s basketball club! They’re strong!”

“Thanks to the Senpais! We lost to Shouan, though.”

And sure enough, a few guys and girls were around my seat.

But, should I call it a small mercy, my seat was at the edge of the group, so nobody was sitting on it.

“Ah, morning. Err… Hosono?”

“… Yeah, morning.”

The moment I placed my bag on my desk, a guy from the group greeted me familiarly.

“Sorry for taking so much place around your seat.”

“No, I don’t mind.”

I took out my pencil box from my bag, putting it on the desk while giving a short reply. Seems like I managed to avoid an annoying conversation.

However, I noticed.

The girl in the seat in front of me, Hiiragi Tokiko seemed uncomfortable as she was surrounded by a part of the group.

My heart made a large beat, as if trying to fly out my mouth.

Even after a day, Hiiragi still looked just like *Tokiko*.

Her looks, her atmosphere and her listless complexion were just like I had imagined them.

So it really wasn't just my imagination yesterday.

Moreover, it made me remember a passage from "14 Years Old'.

──*As I grew older, I became a coward.*

In the time it takes for my classmates to talk about the weather, make-up, or the films that they saw recently, I pass all my time searching for the first word to say, looking around restlessly like an idiot.

In front of my eyes, "I pass all my time searching for the first word to say, looking around restlessly" was clearly describing how Hiiragi Tokiko looked like right now.

I don't know how to enter the conversation. In the first place, I don't know why I am here. These two sentences described her current expression.

Most likely, the group moved around her seat after she sat down. It seems like Hiiragi resembles *Tokiko* on the inside too.

"Ah, by the way," a girl from the group turned her gaze towards Hiiragi, "you're from Shouan right, Hiiragi-chan?"

"Y-yes," Hiiragi answered timidly.

"Then you know Tsuzuki-senpai!? He was in the basketball club, super strong and really handsome, so he was super popular!"

Hiiragi made a troubled face, and after worrying a little,

"S-sorry, I don't know him…"

"Eh, really?"

“Hey, Hiiragi-chan was in the literature club, remember? Then it’s no wonder that she doesn’t know about a Senpai from a sport club.”

“But Tsuzuki-senpai was pretty famous…”

Hiiragi continued to look uncomfortable as the conversation continued.

Somehow, just looking at her made me feel like choking.

They don’t have any ill will. They just want to profit off their short free time before class.

But I perfectly understood how Hiiragi felt, so I prayed for homeroom to start quickly in my mind.

“If you were in the literature club, that means you read many books?”

They continued to ask questions to Hiiragi.

“Yes…”

“What kind of novel do you like? I’m not very knowledgeable about them, do you have a recommendation?”

“U-umm…”

Hiiragi frowned a little, her gaze lowered as she started thinking seriously about it.

—*”What do you like about this book?”*

When my sister asked me that, it made me want to cry.

I can only express my love for a novel with my own words chosen for myself. Feelings are personal, they’re something private you can’t share nor explain. That’s why, I keep them in my head just like a squirrel keeping food when hibernating during winter.

It felt like she had pointed out that doing that was insincere.

I think I'm not wrong to think that it's an accidental resemblance.

I mean, it's impossible for the heroine of a book to appear in reality.

Still, the girl before my eyes, Hiiragi Tokiko looked like she was in dire distress, just like *Tokiko* when she felt that "Feelings are personal, they're something private you can't share nor explain".

And that's why,

"… Somehow, she looks like she would like old literature."

Unconsciously, I started to talk.

"Something from early Showa… rather than something with an impressive development, she gives the image of liking feminine and tranquil works made by female authors. With a woman as a protagonist…"

Everyone from the group stared at me, who had suddenly started to talk.

They had an *Eh, what…? Why did that guy start to talk…?* like expression.

But amongst them, only Hiiragi said "Y-yes," looking at me as if she was looking at a rare creature.

"You're, right. Exactly like you said…"

"… Just like I thought. Somehow you give the vibe you'd like that. I read that kind of novel rather often too…"

While making it look like I was calm as I was talking, the truth was that I was pretty surprised from Hiiragi's affirmation.

I got it right.

What I said was exactly what *Tokiko* said she liked in “14 Years Old”.

It’s not that peculiar of a taste. I’m sure there are as many girls who like Showa’s literature for women as there are stars.

However, her looks, her atmosphere, her name and even her taste in novels. Even if this a coincidence, I think it’s quite a rare case.

As I was thinking such things, the chime signaling the beginning of homeroom rang.

With some “Already?” and “Later,” each person of the group went back to their seat.

Hiiragi, relieved, took a short breath, then glanced briefly my way with her eyes narrowed in question.

And that, too, overlapped with my image of *Tokiko*, giving me a strange sense of uneasiness.

□

“Well then that’s it for today. See you tomorrow!”

The last homeroom ended and my classmates left their seat noisily.

Some were making plans to go play with others, some were promising to go look at clubs together, another hurriedly left the classroom, and amongst them, Hiiragi was quietly putting her things away in her bag.

If it was Tokiko... I thought, as I looked at the back of her bob cut.

If Hiiragi was *Tokiko*… She would go back home immediately. It seems like she was a member of her club only on paper in middle school, so I feel like

she would just leave school, stop by the bookstore, and if a new book interests her then she'd buy it.

When I was thinking that,

"Ah…"

She dropped something.

It rolled on the ground until it hit my foot.

I reflexively bent and picked it up.

"This is…"

It was shining black with a gold coloured ornament, a palm-sized writing implement.

It was a fountain pen.

I'm not even surprised at this point.

Tokiko too carried a fountain pen, she had received it from her sister. When I read that, I saved up a little money and bought one for myself to imitate her.

And today, it kept happening again and again.

During lunch break, Hiiragi ate her lunch box, which looked homemade, alone at her desk. Said lunch box was made of wood and had two layers. *Tokiko* made her and her sister's lunches everyday, and if I remember correctly the lunch box depicted was something similar too.

During all the breaks, she spent her time reading. Contrary to what you would normally expect from her, it was a foreign novel titled "The Scream of Auction Number 49". The same novel that *Tokiko* had said that she would like to try herself at reading once she gets into high school in "14 Years Old".

At first, I was surprised each time I found something they had in common.

But after lunch break, conversely I had frantically started to search for differences between them.

Because I searched what they had in common, I found them. Surely it must have been because deep down I had some expectations. That's why, if I search for differences, I should definitely find them. Or so I thought.

However, Hiiragi continued to behave like *Tokiko*.

When designated by the teacher, Hiiragi smoothly read out an old text using the former writing system. During PE, she tied up her short hair behind her head. During the last homeroom, she listened to the teacher with her back straight.

Her every behavior matched perfectly with my impression of *Tokiko* and her portrayal I had in my mind.

I know that a character from a novel can't appear in reality.

And yet, Hiiragi who was nothing but the perfect representation of *Tokiko* was gradually destroying my reason and common sense.

"I'm sorry," said Hiiragi turning towards me apologetically as I was looking at the fountain pen.

"Thank you for picking it up."

Her eyes, which gave a big impression because of her small face, looked at me from point-blank range.

"Ah, no problem… Still, it's rare to be using a fountain pen…"

"Umm… My sister gave it to me."

"Ooh, I, see… Actually, I got one too."

"Really? Hosono-kun too…"

Perhaps it interested her, Hiiragi peered at me.

I reflexively looked away from her.

“There was the thing this morning too… Perhaps we have the same tastes?”

I can’t hold back anymore.

I don’t know what’s happening, or what kind of reason is at work here.

Even so, I want to know the relation between Hiiragi and *Tokiko*.

Even if there isn’t one, I’m fine with that.

“Hey.”

“… Yes?”

As I started to talk, Hiiragi stiffened up to the point that even an outsider could understand.

“Hiiragi’s favourite novel, it’s ‘Wanderings in the Realm of the Seventh Sense’ from Ozaki Midori, right?”

The instant I said that, Hiiragi opened her eyes wide.

She opened her mouth slightly, looked at me blankly for a moment then answered shortly after.

“Y-yes…”

And one more. But I guess it’s still in the realm of being just a coincidence, so let’s try to question about more private things.

“You have an oil painting you received from your grandmother in your bedroom?”

“… Yes…”

“Every week you listen to the radio broadcast made by some university students?”

She didn’t answer anymore.

To the dumbfounded Hiiragi, I asked the last question:

“Hiiragi, do you think that you want to live beautifully?”

I don’t know what’s happening, or what kind of reason is at work here.

Still, if she can understand this question.

If when asked this she can understand the meaning of the question.

Then there would be no doubt that Hiiragi is *Tokiko*.

Hiiragi looked at me, trembling slightly.

But a few seconds later, she made the face of someone who understood something.

“… Could it be…” Hiiragi murmured, “Hosono-kun, could it be that… you read…”

“Read *this* book?”

I took out “14 Years Old” from inside my desk.

The next instant, Hiiragi caught my arm with incredible swiftness.

I could feel her cold fingers on my wrist.

“Eh!? Wait, what are you…”

“Come with me,” said Hiiragi looking at her wits’ end. “I’ll explain, so come with me,” she said as she left her seat.

Her expression was serious, and she looked pretty cornered, so,

“… Okay.”

I agreed, left my seat and followed Hiiragi silently.

□

We went out of the classroom, walked through the hallway, traversed the passage towards the club building, climbed the stairs, then Hiiragi finally stopped in front of a door where “Temporary Classroom” was written.

We could hear the workshop’s machines-like beat of drums, and the long tones of trumpets sounding like a worn out klaxon.

Behind the window, the members of the baseball club were doing some kind of training on the sports ground.

I don’t see signs of anyone around. Seems like the guys in the cultural clubs don’t really come here.

“W-what’s the matter…” I asked Hiiragi nervously after she had finally let go of my hand.

“… You read it?”

Hiiragi looked at me at point-blank range.

It was kind of discomforting, so I unintentionally twisted my body.

“You read it…?,” repeated Hiiragi.

Then I finally understood that she was talking about “14 Years Old”.

“Y-yeah, I read it…”

“… Aaaah…”

Hiiragi let out a miserable voice, then put both of her hands on her face.

Her white cheeks tinged red before my eyes.

"… Of course. It was obvious… that I would meet someone who had read it one day…"

"… Can you explain?"

I made up my mind and started to talk:

"The heroine of this novel, *Tokiko*… She really resembles you, Hiiragi. Be it the appearance, or the personality, not only that, basically everything…"

"…"

"The fountain pen and your favourite novel, they were written in '14 Years Old'. And the painting from your grandmother in your bedroom, as well as the radio broadcast too."

"… You really remember the content of this novel."

"Well yeah, I reread it many times after all."

"Many times!?"

I reflexively trembled a little from her sudden rise in voice.

Changing her expression totally from earlier, she pressed me,

"W-why!?"

"Err, well… Because I really liked it."

"… Huh?"

"Umm, for one, I really understand *Tokiko*'s feelings… and well, because I simply just really like this novel."

“… I-I see,” said Hiiragi, then she finally drew back and took a short breath.

My stiff body calmed down, and I loosened the strength of my grip.

Then she blushed faintly, and with a slight smile,

“It’s the first time someone has said something like that to me…”

From the way she spoke, there was no doubt that Hiiragi knew “14 Years Old”. More than that, it looked like she had some sort of deep attachment to it.

“… Umm, you see…”

Hiiragi searched for words for an instant, looking down. Then, after looking away, most likely hesitating to speak, she turned towards me with a determined expression and said:

“It’s me.”

“… What?”

“The author, Hiiragi Tokoro… she’s my sister, and ‘14 Years Old’ is a novel written about me. So, the *Tokiko* in this novel, it’s me…”

A few seconds after hearing these words, the meaning finally made its way to my brain.

The heat I felt throughout my body wasn’t from something as simple as just being shocked.

I had trouble breathing, my mind became numb and became hot. My hands were trembling, and my legs grew weak.

My thoughts suddenly became vague, and my vision fuzzy.

Tokiko was before my eyes.

My impression wasn’t wrong.

“14 Years Old” is a novel about Hiiragi Tokiko made by her sister.

So in short, my classmate, Hiiragi Tokiko, was the protagonist of “14 Years Old”, *Tokiko* herself.

“Seriously…”

She didn’t show me any proof. In fact, I never met Hiiragi’s sister, so it could just be her spouting nonsense.

Still, I easily believed her words.

If not, how would I be able to explain how much Hiiragi and *Tokiko* resembled each other.

“Y-you know!”

Once the heat passed on, I was trembling with excitement.

“This novel, I really like it! Seriously, amongst all the books I read, it’s the one I found the most interesting!”

“R-really?… Thank you…”

Hiiragi looked away, blushing faintly.

“I rarely have such thoughts, but I could feel real empathy towards *Tokiko*, each of her words are full of persuasiveness… I felt like I had a comrade in there.”

“Thank you… This novel, it’s a little like a diary of my middle school days… so it makes me happy for you to be saying that…”

“I see, considering Hiiragi’s point of view, that would be the case… Umm, more importantly, err… Right! The ‘I’m not different from them’ part! You know, ‘*I’m different from everyone* and *I’m the same as everyone*, no matter which one, the moment you put others on a different axis, they’re the same’! I thought it was totally right, it’s something really perceptive to point out──”

“W-wait, stop!”

Hiiragi pushed her palm towards me, her face bright red.

“It’s embarrassing, so stop… Speaking about the contents is…”

“Err, ah, yeah, s-sorry…” I hurriedly stopped myself from talking, “Could it be you don’t really want to talk about it…?”

“… Umm, well, that’s not really it,” Hiiragi lowered her sight, searched for words for a moment, and then, “I don’t mind talking about ‘14 Years Old’. It really depicts my feelings and thoughts very well, and even now I think the same way as I did in the book… But, to hear someone talking about it, how to say it, it’s like listening to a recording of myself…”

“… I see.”

I kinda felt like I got it.

Certainly, hearing someone read out aloud sentences from your thoughts and feelings must be embarrassing.

My tension was too high causing me to talk too much.

“… But you know, it’s amazing. To become the protagonist of a novel I mean.”

I hurriedly suppressed my excitement and this time what came to mind was pure admiration.

I couldn’t really calm myself down completely. Though I guess it’s normal, considering the situation.

“What’s more, it’s quite well rated, no? I think I saw somewhere that the literary critics had given it rave reviews.”

While the sales of “14 Years Old” were average, it was supported by some maniac fans. In fact, it still gets some small articles in a few magazines, and many zealous reviews praise it as an unknown masterpiece on the Internet.

“You’re right… It seems even the editorial department rated it rather well, so they started talks about a sequel with my sister…”

“Seriously?”

“Yes, though the release date and all aren’t fixed at all.”

That’s the best news I could hear.

After all, my only gripe with “14 Years Old” is its shortness.

Though it being short for a full length novel is one of the reasons, it’s more that it’s wasteful to have *Tokiko*’s charm contained in only a single volume. I always thought that they should absolutely publish a sequel.

“I see. Well… I’m looking forward to it, really.”

“Thank you. I’ll tell my sister too… A-also, umm,” Hiiragi blushed once again, “I would like it if you kept it secret that I appear in a novel. Because… well, you know, there are some rather embarrassing scenes…”

“… Ah, yeah.”

Just after being told that, I remembered.

There is a bath scene where *Tokiko* thinks about her body. A passage where she thinks that her breasts getting bigger was unpleasant, but she can’t do anything about it. Unfortunately, though, a guy like me couldn’t sympathise with her on that.

But I see.

What was depicted is the Hiiragi in front of my eyes, her feelings and her body──

“…!”

As I was thinking that, I looked towards Hiiragi’s chest for an instant.

The moderate twin bulges pushing up her blouse.

I strangely felt guilty, so I hurriedly looked away.

Perhaps she noticed… That I glanced at her chest.

If so, then it's the worst. Glancing at her chest while remembering the bath scene from the novel, it'd be an understatement to just call that disgusting.

Seriously, what am I doing…

"W-well, that's all I wanted to say…"

I don't know if she noticed it or not, but Hiiragi said that with a stiff tone.

"I'm sorry, to bring you to such a place so suddenly…"

"N-no, I don't mind."

I shook my head like a dog who got drenched with water.

"Thank you… Well, with this…"

Hiiragi bowed her head a little, then she turned and left towards the classroom building.

I couldn't see her back anymore.

I could faintly hear the drums' beat and the long tones.

And I was still confused, as a psychedelic whirlpool was swirling in my mind.

□

That night, I had quite a hard time falling asleep.

Excitement and confusion. The joy of having *Tokiko* in my class, and regret from my rude glance. It was the first time in my life that I had felt so many feelings so vividly at the same time.

What will I do from now on?, I thought as I laid down on my bed.

I will get to be with *Tokiko* for at least a year. During that time, I wonder what will I encounter, and what will I experience.

Or perhaps, nothing will happen.

After all, I'm supposed to keep the secret about her being the heroine of "14 Years Old", so we can't really talk about it in the classroom. So maybe we will just live on as "only classmates" until graduation. Considering my personality, it's the most possible outcome.

… But well, that's just how it is.

The only thing I want is to live alone, without being involved with anyone.

The same goes for Hiiragi, so it wouldn't do good for any of us by closing the distance between us.

I looked up at the clock while sighing, it was already 3am.

Then, the next morning.

I opened my shoe rack half asleep, and inside was a small letter.

──I thought about various things and there is something I want to talk about. Please come see me after school. Hiiragi.

Black ink from a fountain pen. Different from the girls in my class, it was written elegantly.

Without a doubt it was *Tokiko*── it was Hiiragi who wrote this letter.

□

“I’m sorry, right after what I said yesterday…”

While walking a little ahead of me Hiiragi turned her head towards me feeling sorry.

“There’s something that I really want to talk about…”

As usual, her expression was the same as my image of *Tokiko*, and just like yesterday I was still in a sort of intoxicated state, so I shook my head nervously.

“Yeah, well, I don’t mind it…”

After school, just like the letter asked I went to see Hiiragi, then she told me to follow her and we went out of the school.

Then we passed the shopping district and the station, and were now currently at the residential area. Yet, she still didn’t tell me where we were going.

Where are we going? And what does she want to talk to me about?

I looked at Hiiragi’s back, gradually being filled with anxiety.

It can’t be… She’s going to make me sign a contract to not reveal anything? While being only a mid sized company, the Machida Edition who published “14 Years Old” is still a veteran in the field. Perhaps they have procedures to respect the privacy of the author and their relatives.

Or maybe Hiiragi noticed my glance yesterday and wants to tell me to never talk to her again. I'm sure that I was pretty creepy back then.

Thanks to "14 Years Old" I'm supposed to know rather accurately about her personality and the way she thinks.

And yet, no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't understand what Hiiragi wanted to do.

Finally, we arrived in front of a park.

A children's park in the middle of the residential area, around half the size of a 25 meters pool. Kids back from their kindergarten classes were running around, and the mothers were intimately talking to each other on the benches.

"Let's talk here," said Hiiragi, heading towards a vacant bench.

Seeing how naturel she felt, I finally noticed.

This was the park which appeared many times in "14 Years Old", *Tokiko*'s favourite place. When she usually had a dispute with her sister or felt down, *Tokiko* often came here and passed the time idling around.

"So this place is…"

Coming to the "stage" of my favourite work, isn't that basically what's called a pilgrimage? I wasn't particularly interested in these kind of things, but actually being here it's pretty moving. What's more, the protagonist is actually next to me.

"Umm… I'm sorry," Hiiragi started to speak, "for making you come here. But it's a little difficult to talk at school, so…"

Hiiragi started to explain nervously. Considering her character, it's probably the first time she took out a classmate somewhere.

“Ah, well, no, don’t worry about it, it’s not like I had something planned.”

“Thank you. Well then, about the thing I wanted to talk about…”

Hiiragi hung her head, then started to mumble a few words for a while.

Then, probably having resolved herself, she suddenly raised her face and said:

“I have a favour to ask of you.”

“… A favour?”

I couldn’t help but repeat the words because of how unexpected they were.

What does she mean? A favour to ask? To me? Like I thought, she doesn’t want me to talk to her again──

“Please help me.”

My thoughts came to a stop.

“Umm, I thought about it for the whole night then I noticed. That you helped me yesterday morning, Hosono-kun. When I was helpless and couldn’t answer, you intervened to make it easier for me. When it happened, I didn’t notice it at all. I just thought that there was someone else who liked Japanese literature. But… actually, that was you helping me, right?”

“That’s…”

I was at a loss for words for an instant. I helped her. Saying that makes it look good, but actually it was also me investigating her. Unlike what Hiiragi said, it wasn’t an act based purely on my sense of justice.

“Well, yeah, you’re right. But you know, a big part of it was also me wanting to know why Hiiragi looked so much like *Tokiko*…”

“Even so, it really helped me. I’m always like that, so I make the ambiance awkward. I would like to improve a little, but I don’t know how to…”

I remembered that even in the novel, there were scenes where *Tokiko* couldn’t talk clearly with people.

That she still didn’t solve this problem was obvious enough looking at what happened yesterday.

“You see, I thought you were really kind, Hosono-kun. That you had to be a good person for helping a stranger like me.”

“You’re… thinking too highly of me.”

I understood her feelings to a certain degree, but I couldn’t agree about me being kind. I’m not the *good guy* she thinks I am.

And yet,

“That’s not true,” said Hiiragi shaking her head obstinately. “You see, I think it’s like this. A kind person isn’t always a good person, and a good person isn’t always a kind person. But… Someone not aware of their own kindness is without a doubt a good person and a kind person too.”

“… I see.”

Even though she praised me, I didn’t feel like it was true, so I couldn’t feel embarrassed.

However, hearing her remarks, I felt it once again.

These thoughts and this way of thinking… It was unmistakably *Tokiko* who I was talking with right now.

“That’s why, if possible… Would you help me, Hosono-kun? Umm, until I can get used to everyone, as well as a few other things, could you help me like you did yesterday…? I’ll do anything I can as thanks…” said Hiiragi carefully, her gaze wandering around.

Then, looking apologetic, she looked towards me,

“I’m sorry for being selfish. But by myself I just don’t know what to do…”

──*I’m sorry for being selfish. In no way am I as strong as you think I am.*

I remembered that line from *Tokiko* in “14 Years Old”.

Right now, *Tokiko* herself said words that really resembled those to me.

I took a big breath, then spat out the air slowly.

Looking around the park, kids were still shouting happily, and the mothers zealously chattering. The slides had rust on them, the sandbox had a net hanging around it. The driver for a home delivery service company was asking for the sign on a voucher to its recipient; a bicycle made a strident sound when it stopped suddenly.

And, next to me, was a high school girl in her uniform.

Hiiragi Tokiko, looking at her feets anxiously.

In a way, you can say that we’re continuing after the epilogue of “14 Years Old” here.

Continuing after the time *Tokiko* passed in the novel.

She became 15, and this is a new page of the high school girl Hiiragi Tokiko’s daily life.

And there, not only do I exist, but she even asked me for my help.

I’m becoming a character of her story──.

… My head and my feelings couldn’t keep up anymore.

Even though Hiiragi appearing in front of me should be a coincidence happening only once in a lifetime, instead of everything going back to normal, it's starting to develop in a really strange direction.

...What should I do?

Should I accept? Or should I refuse?

I intended to not involve myself with others in high school, just like in middle school.

Keep the conversations and the committee work to the minimum, and not join any clubs. Same for my human relations, I intended to keep them as small as possible.

Based on these principles, I should refuse without hesitation.

However,

"… Okay," I said, nodding at Hiiragi. "If there's something I can help with, I will."

"… Really?"

"Yeah, though I don't think I can help you that much…"

There was no way I could refuse.

Tokiko is asking for *my* help. I, who was yearning for her and continued to receive her influence, am needed by her. It was impossible for me to ignore her wish.

There was also the feeling of wanting to be near Hiiragi.

I wanted to look at her, listen to her words, observe her actions.

I'm sure that many readers would love to look at the *Tokiko* from after the story. And most likely, I was the only one in the whole world who could get

this privilege right now. I couldn't think about letting that right go away right before my eyes.

Also, I think I can manage.

I know Hiiragi's hobbies and her personality pretty well. After all, I read, read and reread again and again the novel about her for a year. If I was asked by someone else I would hesitate, but if it's Hiiragi, I felt like I could manage.

I don't know how helpful I'd be.

Still, I don't think that she'll think it'd have been better if she didn't ask.

In that case, I want to help Hiiragi.

"Thank you."

Hiiragi smiled. Her white and soft cheeks loosened, and she narrowed her almond eyes slightly.

It was like the first smile of a newborn baby, a defenseless cherubic smile.

"Please take care of me from now on."

Then I noticed.

That until just now, Hiiragi didn't smile a single time.

——*Being sly, yet holding expectations, even if I finally feel ashamed now, I can't say anything. That's why, I only blink solemnly.*

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 2 – I want to keep touching you

“Heeeey, the three of us should really go out to play!”

I received this message on LINE from Sudou just after I finished changing into my school slippers. The notification bar showed a short sentence along with a green icon.

The one who had installed that app on my smartphone was none other than Sudou Itsuka. She had installed it on her phone around our second year of middle school and was fairly impressed by its usefulness. So she just arbitrarily took my phone, installed the app and made an account for me. I then got Sudou and Hiroo Shuuji registered as friends.

I didn’t really use it, so I had uninstalled it. However, when Sudou noticed that she ended up throwing a fit and had reinstalled it after she took my phone. I tried to uninstall it again a few more times after that, but the same thing kept happening again, so I just gave up in the end because of how troublesome it was. Since then I’ve been receiving messages from them from time to time.

Incidentally, whether I answered or not was entirely up to my mood. And this time,

“Whatever.”

I just put my phone in my blazer’s pocket and went to my classroom.

A week has gone by since Hiiragi asked for my help.

Since then, I tried my best to stay near her during breaks so that I could help her during conversations.

For example:

“Hiiragi-chan, do you play any mobile game? Wanna play with us?”

“… Err, games? Umm…”

“Nah, Hiiragi doesn’t play any. She doesn’t even look like she can use her smartphone that well.”

“… O-oh, you really cut into the conversation, Hosono…”

“Ah, but it’s as Hosono-kun said… I don’t play any games…”

“Wow! Hiiragi-san’s pen case is so cute! Did you make it yourself?”

“I, umm… Well…”

“Seems to be a little old, isn’t it from someone else in her family?”

“Holy, you surprised me! Don’t suddenly speak from behind me…”

“B-but he’s right… I received it from my mother…”

Honestly, it was doubtful if there were any results at all. I did the minimum I could to help her along in her conversations, so in a way it might have been the same even if I weren’t there.

Besides, I couldn’t bear the fact that the mood turned awkward every time I interrupted their conversation. Now that I think about it, I was clearly

supposed to be avoiding people. So of course it wouldn't go so well when I am the one helping someone communicate with others.

What's more, somehow Hiiragi herself wasn't that proactive about it. If you leave her alone she'll immediately start to read a book and seclude herself in her own world. I was the same, so I can't really complain, and I'm also glad when she thanks me, but shouldn't she be showing a little more motivation?

That aside,

"… Can't give me a rest, huh."

While I was walking towards my classroom, my phone kept receiving notifications from LINE.

Most likely, Sudou and Shuuji were talking to each other. All three of us are in the same group conversation, so even when the two of them talk between themselves, my phone too keeps vibrating.

"… Tsk."

I let out a sigh, then looked at their conversation until now.

Shuuji: Yeah, sounds great! It's been a while so I want to go somewhere too!

Itsuka: Right? I wanna go to the karaoke. Didn't go recently.

Itsuka: (Stamp of a dog inclining its head with a "What about it?")

Shuuji: Karaoke sounds good. I wanna go too!

Itsuka: And Hosono? Karaoke is fine right?

Itsuka: Actually, it's not marked as read

Itsuka: That guy, he isn't looking at his phone

Shuuji: Nah, the first message shows "Read 2"

Itsuka: You're right! He's ignoring us!

Itsuka: Heeey! Read the messages we are sending you!

Itsuka: (Stamp of an angered dog)

Shuuji: (Stamp of an angered American Comic Hero)

Itsuka: Ah, it changed to read

Itsuka: You're looking right? Hey, Hosono! Answer!

Itsuka: Heeeey!

Shuuji: Heeeey!

I put back my phone in my pocket. I still keep getting notifications, but it should stop before long. If I answer them now, it's highly likely that I'll end up going to karaoke with them.

Finally reaching my classroom, I opened the door and headed to my seat.

"Good morning," said Hiiragi who was already seated as she raised her face from the book she was reading.

"Yeah, morning."

Since that day, greeting Hiiragi the first thing in the morning had become my daily routine. In middle school I went to school without saying a word, so I have to say that this is a rather surprising change.

Thinking about change, I decided to talk to Hiiragi regarding my concern.

“So, what should we do?”

“Yes?”

“No well, you asked my help and all, but… in the end, I only back you up during conversations, no?”

What’s more, I’m doing it rather poorly.

“That’s, true…”

“Shouldn’t we do, you know, something about that?”

“Hmm…” Hiiragi put her book on her desk and started to think. “Certainly, I do think we should do something more… But if it’s not done gradually, it’s a little scary. Suddenly going out to play with someone totally different is impossible…”

“Yeah, that would be hard…”

I tried imagining people who were different from Hiiragi, for example gals, going out to play with her, and it made me almost crack up.

If it came to that, would she end up putting some showy make-up and do lots of photo shots? In a way, I want to see that.

“So I think we should slowly go at it, so that we can naturally get used to it…” said Hiiragi looking at me imploringly. “I’m sorry for being so demanding…”

“… Nah, it’s fine.”

While feigning calm, I felt strangely moved as I looked at her apologetic expression.

To say it again, it really was an extraordinary development.

It’s already been a week, but I still couldn’t help but feel like all of this was a dream.

I became acquainted with *Tokiko*, and was able to talk with her everyday. If I said that to the me who had just finished reading “14 Years Old” I’m sure that he wouldn’t have believed me. After all, I’m still thinking that I might wake up in my bed before long.

After I met Hiiragi, I reread “14 Years Old” many times.

Changing *Tokiko*, who was only a figment of my imagination, with Hiiragi, a concrete existence, made a great difference in my opinion. Her thoughts and words felt far more real than before.

Rather than Hiiragi appearing and making reality look like a dream, perhaps it was more like the dream, the world of the novel, had come closer to reality.

Then as if trying to cut my thoughts to shreds,

“He’s here! Hosono!”

“So you really came to school.”

The two who were like the incarnations of reality appeared.

While sighing, I looked towards the entrance of the classroom, where the voices had come from.

“Really, why do you not answer on LINE!? I was worried and thought that you might have been sick!”

“I didn’t think you were, though.”

Sudou Itsuka, her small animal-like face filled with anger, and Hiroo Shuuji, tall and good looking like an actor, came towards me.

On the side I could see Hiiragi stiffening because of their apparition.

“Hey, you read the messages on LINE, right!?”

“… Yeah, I did,” I answered reluctantly as Sudou stood before me.

“Then answer! Because we’re not in the same class anymore, we can’t talk directly as easily as before!”

“You don’t need to go that far just to talk, you know? We can do that just fine with the people of our own class.”

“What the, you’re so cold! Weren’t we always together ever since primary school!” said the angry Sudou, her hands on her hips as she threw her chest out.

She was trying to be intimidating, but it didn’t work at all with her 150 centimeters stature. The hair tied up on both sides of her head shook up and down as she talked, so it was more comical than anything.

But well, being like that was actually a good point to some guys, and her bright personality on top of that made her rather popular.

“But really, for Hosono to be the only one in a different class,” said Shuuji with a wry smile as he sat down on a vacant seat behind Sudou. “The dream of being in the same class for ten consecutive years was broken off.”

“I never dreamt about such a thing…”

During this conversation, the girls in the class were all staring at Shuuji.

If I had to give an example about his looks, then it would be something like “a handsome actor showered by the passionate gaze of married women who just started acting after being a model”. What’s more, he has a calm and composed personality, as well as quite the high communication powers. So yeah, girls can’t ignore him.

“So in the end, how is it? Got any friend?”

“Well… Don’t know if you can say friends…” I unintentionally looked at the seat before me as I answered.

I don’t know if I can qualify her as a “friend”, but in this class Hiiragi was the one with whom I had talked the most.

And of course, Shuuji noticed my glance.

“Could it be that you get along with this girl? It looked like you were talking with her before we came.”

“What!? Really!?” changing her expression from anger to curiosity instantly, Sudou bent towards Hiiragi. “Nice to meet you! I’m Sudou Itsuka from class 2! I’ve been friends with Hosono since primary school!”

“And I’m Hiroo Shuuji. Same as her, I’ve been friends with him since primary school too.”

“Ah, I-I see… I’m Hiiragi Tokiko,” Hiiragi drew back. “Nice to meet you…”

Her shoulders stiffened up, and she looked like she was about to flee at any moment.

Whether she noticed it or not, Sudou continued to talk with a smile.

“Hosono isn’t really the sociable type, but he isn’t a bad guy. I hope you’ll get along with him.”

“Y-yes… I know that he’s a good person.”

“Eeh, Hosono really made a friend. That’s good. I was worried that you would become a loner,” said Shuuji.

It’s none of your business. Or so I thought, but didn’t voice it out.

Still, these guys are really something. In a good way, and in a bad way too. And in this case particularly, it was the latter.

To talk like that with a girl you just met isn’t something easy to do. This carefreeness is a privilege given only to those blessed with a certain character. *Tokiko* said the same thing in “14 Years Old”.

“Ah, I know!”

Suddenly, Sudou made an expression like she found the answer for a quiz.

Then she bent forward even more towards Hiiragi and,

“Hiiragi-san, want to come to the karaoke with us after school?”

“What!?”

The one who raised a surprised voice, was me.

“Hey, Sudou… What are you trying to do…”

To invite someone you just met, what’s more to the karaoke, just what was she thinking?

No matter how you looked at her, Hiiragi didn’t seem like the type who would sing. In the first place she’s totally drawing back and has been hanging her face since earlier, there’s no way she would accept.

“That’s fine. We finally became high schoolers, I want to play with lots of people! Shuuji, you want to invite Hiiragi-san too, right?”

“You’re right. It’s always the three of us. Should be fun to add a new member.”

“Look here, you guys should just… Hiiragi, just ignore them.”

It was useless to say something to them, so I gave up midway and continued to speak to Hiiragi.

“These guys are the type who approach others easily, so you don’t need to accept and go to the karaoke.”

Looking at her, Hiiragi was looking down seeming like she was thinking hard about something. Perhaps it got really uncomfortable for her.

She was already at her wits end with just talking to our classmates. So yeah, she might not be able to keep her calm after being invited so suddenly.

“Anyway, just give up for today,” I said as I turned towards Sudou once again. “I’m still thinking about going out to play. But you shouldn’t involve Hiiragi──”

“I’m coming.”

I doubted my ears when I heard her voice.

“Me too… I want to go to karaoke.”

Looking at her, Hiiragi was making a resolved face while she looked up at Sudou and Shuuji.

“Oooh, nice, Hiiragi-san!”

“Alright, then it’s the four of us after school.”

“No, wait a second!”

Leaving the two who were cheering alone, I once again turned towards Hiiragi.

“Are you sure about this? It’s karaoke you know? It’s not just going out to play.”

“I know…”

“It’s true that I was thinking that you should be a bit more proactive just earlier, but still…”

That Hiiragi… That *Tokiko* from “14 Years Old” going to karaoke, I couldn’t imagine it.

In the novel, *Tokiko* did speak about the songs that she liked. It was written that she liked stylish western music, and the subculture songs sung by female singers, so I guess she might actually be singing secretly in her room from time to time.

But even then, singing at the karaoke in front of Sudou and Shuuji…

Based on “14 Years Old”, I truly didn’t think that she was the type to do that.

“But if i miss this chance, I might not have another one… Also, those two look like good people.”

I could feel a strong sense of determination in her voice.

“That’s why, I want to go too…”

If it’s like that, then she won’t change her decision. Her determination isn’t something you can twist easily. I was charmed by her stubbornness in “14 Years Old” too after all.

… And that means that I can’t run away anymore either.

I can’t just throw Hiiragi alone between Sudou and Shuuji. The moment she asked for my help, it was decided that I would go with them.

“… I got it,” I said after letting out a deep sigh and nodded reluctantly. “I’m coming to the karaoke too…”

□

“It’s 1430 yen per person, self-service bar included. Your room is on the third floor, at the far end on your right when alighting from the elevator. The bar is to the left of your room. Please take your time,” the receptionist of the karaoke in the neighbouring town told us as we entered.

After hearing her, we went into the narrow elevator, heading towards our room.

“Is this your first time, Tokki?” said Sudou to Hiiragi, with a strange nuance in her words, while being illuminated by the clearly too white fluorescent lights. She even started to use a nickname before we noticed.

“Y-yes… It’s my first time.”

“When was the last time for you Hosono? A year ago?”

“… No, more like three years ago.”

“Seriously?… Wait, you mean you haven’t gone since I had forced you when we entered middle school!?”

“… I mean, it’s not like I wanted to go.”

“Just how much are you going to sever yourself from the outside world!?”

“You’re going too far just for not going to the karaoke…”

“… U-umm, Hosono-kun,” Hiiragi called out to me with a faint voice. “Hmm, I’m really not used to these kind of things, so… Please teach me how it works.”

Hiiragi looked at me with an expression like a student going to appear for a test.

Seeing that, I got anxious again.

Is this really fine? We kinda went on a whim, but will Hiiragi be able to bear with the discomfort for two hours?

Even I, who knows them, am feeling a little depressed. In Hiiragi’s case, she’s going to have to sing in a closed room for two hours with people whom she just met. Perhaps she’s regretting her false bravado now that we have almost arrived.

“… Yeah, leave it to me. I did come once before so I know how it works.”

In this confined space, I secretly strengthened my determination.

The only one who can help Hiiragi here is me. In that case, I have to assist her.

The old elevator made a strange noise as it went up, as if being affected by my uneasiness.

“So, first, this is the remote control.”

After entering our room, I started to first explain about the remote control of the karaoke.

She doesn’t go to game centers and things like that, so she’s rather weak with machines.

“You can touch and write with this pen, here you search for a song, and this button is to search for a particular singer. Then when you’ve chosen a song, you press the ‘Add’ button, and that’s it.”

“I-I see… What are ‘key’ and ‘tempo’?”

“Ah, key is for people with a low or high voice, to change the musical interval of the song. Tempo is to change the speed of the song. But you should go with the default settings for your first time.”

“Got it… I’ll try.”

Making a difficult face, Hiiragi started a staring contest with the remote control.

“Aaaalriiight, time to start!”

Seeing that I had finished my explanations, Sudou took the mike with vigour.

“Let’s sing to our heart’s content! Time is short, so add as many songs as possible! Hosono, Tokki, from now on it’s first come first served!”

It seems that she didn’t intend on going easy on us beginners. This innocence in being unreserved is something characteristic of popular people. But well, it’s still far better than forcing us to sing in order.

The room was just right for four, five people.

You could see the street from the huge window at the north.

The sofas were cracked, the walls had a yellow tint, the air was stinking of cigarettes, the painting of the door was coming off. Really, having Hiiragi here was oddly mismatching.

First, I have to make her calm down.

Just as I took a sip of the drink I took along, the song that Sudou chose started with a very loud volume.

Once Sudou was finished with her idol song, Shuuji immediately followed with a rap.

I guess they come here often as they seem pretty used to hyping themselves up and singing. Hiiragi, who was grasping the remote control tightly while looking at them let out an “Amazing…” with an expression that combined both surprise and impatience.

And abiding to the “First come first served”, Sudou and Shuuji had immediately added a second song for themselves. On the other hand, Hiiragi was still looking at the remote control, thinking hard about something.

“… You don’t need to force yourself,” I said to her in a small voice.

“… I-I know,” said Hiiragi, raising her face. “Thank you, but I want to try my best…”

“… Well, I guess it’s fine then.”

I wonder why. Right now, she seems to be quite stubborn about this karaoke outing. Perhaps she has an objective. I don’t know what it is, but I guess I shouldn’t interfere too much.

“… In that case.”

I took the remote control and started to look for a song.

I think it’s going to take a while for Hiiragi to start singing. She may be stubborn about something, but it should make it easier for her if I sing first. It should lower the hurdle for her.

I thought about a singer and continued to search for a song.

Then, having finished to sing the new song from a group of techno-pop, Sudou let out a surprised voice.

“Oh! You’re already singing, Tokki!”

I raised my face and what appeared on the screen that showed the songs was:

──Added Song “Cappuccino”.

Thinking that it was impossible I turned to look next to me, and I saw Hiiragi pointing the remote control while nodding.

“Yes… I did my best and chose one.”

… You serious? I thought suddenly.

But is she really fine? She has the face of a warrior going to commit seppuku.

Sudou’s song had ended, so she passed the mike to Hiiragi.

Hiiragi took it from her with stiff movements, then “Ah, ah,” did a short mike check. She looked so anxious with her strained expression and trembling voice that I couldn’t help but feel pity.

I knew that she wouldn’t be fine.

If she was going to end up like that then I should have insisted a little more. It's not like anyone urged her to sing.

Not caring about Hiiragi's mental state, the song started.

Cappuccino.

Because the name comes up in the novel I had listened to it before, it's the type of song with lyrics right from the start.

When doing karaoke, that type of song needs you to be used to it. It's a difficult song for a beginner like Hiiragi.

And sure enough, Hiiragi was confused by the sound of the counter.

Then a few seconds after the intro started, Hiiragi noticed and started to sing.

The mood in the room was strained.

It was extremely, well, avant-garde.

If we were to put it more frankly, she sucked.

Hiiragi's voice coming from the speakers was, putting aside the fact she was a beginner, astonishingly off.

An interval was never right, going from low to high unsteadily. The rhythm was off, she made mistakes in the lyrics, and gradually it made you wonder what was she doing.

That's amazing. I never saw someone so off at karaoke.

Still, what's this?

Even then she did her best trying to sing. Her face was bright red, her eyes were darting everywhere and she was holding the mike strongly with both of her hands.

“… So cute,” let out Sudou next to me. “What’s this, Tokki, she just look so cute…”

“Yeah…”

Shuuji too was looking at Hiiragi bewildered.

“What’s this, I just want to cheer for her, support her, just what is this feeling…”

I felt the same. She was so bad that we didn’t know how to react, and yet Hiiragi’s singing held a strange charm.

The kind of charm where you want to always listen to it, or record a video and watch it endlessly.

You often hear that singing isn’t just about the skills, but rather about the feelings you pour into it. And yet, it was the first time that I got so attracted to someone who is bad and isn’t even pouring her feelings into the song.

“I-I’m sorry for being so bad at singing…” said Hiiragi her face bright red as she put down the mike now that the song ended. “I’m not used to singing… Or more like, I’m bad in music class too…”

“No, well, in a way, it was good,” said Sudou earnestly, with a certain passion in her voice.

Then Shuuji continued with a serious expression:

“I want you to sing forever, Hiiragi-san.”

“Same here.”

Unusual for me, I agreed with what Shuuji said.

“Eh, t-that’s embarrassing…”

Her whole face bright red, Hiiragi twisted her body bashfully on the sofa.

“Anyway, we stopped singing, someone has to! Actually, you still didn’t sing Hosono!” said Sudou, as she picked up the remote control.

Seems like everyone lost themselves in Hiiragi’s song and forgot to add a new song.

“I know…”

I sighed, then added a song amongst the ones I had considered doing.

Immediately after the intro started. I took the mike and cleared my throat lightly.

Time to sing.

I was quite reluctant in coming, but actually I’m pretty confident in my singing.

□

“Ah, you want to drink something too, Hosono-kun?”

On the way back from the toilet I encountered Hiiragi who was pouring herself black tea at the bar.

“I sang quite a lot, so my throat is parched.”

“Yeah, me too. Then can you pour me a coffee? A hot one.”

“Of course… This cup should be for hot coffee,” said Hiiragi, taking a cup on the tray, then she proceeded to fill it with hot coffee at the bar.

We both looked at the dark liquid pouring noisily into the cup.

“… Haaa…”

Hiiragi sighed suddenly.

“… What? As I thought, was it uncomfortable?”

“No, that’s not it,” said Hiiragi as she passed me the now filled up cup. She said as she pouted, “To think that you were such a good singer, Hosono-kun… I feel a little betrayed. I thought we were comrades…”

“Ah, yeah, sorry,” I said as I took the cup while scratching my head from the embarrassment. “Singing is one of my only strong points… But really, your singing was good too. I’m not flattering you.”

“Really…?”

Hiiragi took the straw in her mouth and drank her iced tea while sulking.

We could hear Shuuji’s voice and Sudou’s tambourine from here. These guy could get hyped to 120% even without us. While I envied how carefree they were, it was also proof that they were people from a different world than me.

“Anyway, you’re really fine?” I asked Hiiragi, still worried. “It’s great that you’re trying your best, but if you’re bad with it then you should stop quickly.”

An hour has passed since we started. Hiiragi sang three times, and each time she was bright red with her voice so feeble that you could barely hear it. Yeah, she’s really forcing herself. She’s trying to be considerate to Sudou and Shuuji. I couldn’t help but feel that way.

“Yes, I’m fine,” answered Hiiragi. ”I’m still a little nervous but… I really want to try. If I get used to it, then I think I’ll start to enjoy myself too.”

Her tone was very natural and it didn’t feel like a lie.

“I see, then I guess that’s fine…”

I let out a short sigh and took a sip of my coffee.

“Still, it’s hot…” said Hiiragi fanning herself with her hand.

Actually, looking at it, her iced tea was filled with ice cubes.

“To think that singing used so much energy… I started to sweat, so I left my blazer in the room…”

I only noticed after she said it. Hiiragi was currently only wearing her blouse and her skirt.

“Yeah… They say that pro singers lose a few kilos when they do a live.”

“Ehh, could it be a way to diet…”

Then Hiiragi pinched the chest part of her blouse, pulled it and started to fan the inside of her clothes.

The lines of her body were emphasised, and her white blouse was transparent enough to see a shoulder strap. My eyes focused on that part for an instant, then I felt guilty and averted my eyes. Even though I wouldn’t feel anything if I saw Sudou’s bra…

Thinking that, I remembered something.

In “14 Years Old” there is a scene where *Tokiko* speaks about her underwear. Something like she bought flower patterned underwear, but she felt like they didn’t suit her personality and body.

Once again, I stole a glance at Hiiragi.

Maybe she’s wearing flower patterned underwear right now too?

Perhaps she’s wearing underwear that she felt didn’t suit her.

“… Is there something?”

“N-no, nothing!”

I averted my eyes from Hiiragi who looked at me puzzled.

I really want to stop looking at her like that using information from the novel. In the first place that scene wasn’t written with the intention to be glamorous.

□

In the end we ended up extending our stay two times and sang for three hours.

We sang ballades, children songs and anime songs, then Sudou sang the Suginami Ward’s Song as a finish, and when we went out we were completely exhausted.

Honestly, it wasn’t that bad.

I won’t go as far as to say that it was fun. Still, I got the chance to see Hiiragi’s singing, and it was perfect as a training to get used to people.

“Aaah, I sang a lot! How satisfying! … Ah, by the way, I forgot to ask!”

We were on the way back, going towards the nearest station. Then suddenly, Sudou exclaimed as if she just remembered something.

“How did you become friends, Hosono and Tokki? I just can’t imagine how people like you two could become friends naturally.”

“… Aaah,” I unintentionally faltered when confronted with this unexpected question.

Just as Sudou had said, we aren’t the type to become friends naturally with others. If there wasn’t a reason then we wouldn’t even speak to each other, and yet an incredible reason actually brought us closer.

However, I can’t talk about this “incredible reason”. After all, Hiiragi being the model for “14 Years Old” is a secret.

“Well, you see…”

While thinking about a lie that I could use as a suitable reason I looked around us.

Even though it was a weekday, the street was filled with people, notably salary men coming back from work and couples going out to eat. There was a long line before a restaurant and there were people looking at the furnitures of an antique shop. A foreigner working at a Nepalese restaurant was distributing leaflets on the street. Usually I would feel uncomfortable with so many people around, but for some reason I didn’t care that much today.

“Err… We kinda like the same novel,” I started to explain to Sudou and Shuuji the explanation that I came up with. “And well, it’s kind of a unique novel… So when Hiiragi noticed me in class reading it she started talking to me.”

“Oh, well, it’s true that you’re always reading something, Hosono,” said Shuuji with a smile looking like the holy mother. “And Hiiragi-san looks like a literature girl too.”

“Yes… I like books.”

“Then it’s just perfect for you, Hosono, you got a book lover comrade.”

“Well, yeah, you’re right…”

It’s true that getting closer to someone like Hiiragi is the kind of good luck that doesn’t happen often in life.

Though, more than being a book lover, it was because she was actually the heroine from a book.

But of course, Shuuji had to display his sharp mind,

“Still, it’s surprising. I thought that you were acquainted for quite a while. The way you interact doesn’t feel like you met just a few days ago.”

“… Well, we really talked a lot thanks to our common interest in books, so it might look like that,” I managed to answer without leaving an unnatural blank. “We met during the entrance ceremony. In the first place, you’re the best people who know that I don’t really have friends, no? If I knew Hiiragi since before, you’d have noticed.”

“Yeah… That’s true.”

Shuuji made a bitter smile, as if he didn’t agree but couldn’t disagree either.

Then as we talked, we finally reached the nearest station from our houses, Nishiogikubo Station.

Hiiragi’s was south, and ours was north, so it was our breakup point.

“Ah, let’s exchange our LINE contacts!” proposed Sudou as she took out her phone. “From now on we’ll go out to play with Tokki too after all! Do you use LINE?”

“No, I don’t…”

“Then can I install it for you?”

“Y-yes… I’d be glad if you could.”

Sudou took Hiiragi's phone and quickly installed LINE. She made an account and added us as her friends. I thought so when she did it with my phone, but she seems pretty used to it. Perhaps she did it for her other friends too.

"… Thank you for today. It was fun," said Hiiragi while bowing towards us after getting back her phone. "Please invite me again. Well, with this…"

"Yep, later!"

"See you!"

After Sudou and Shuuji, I too said "See you tomorrow," while waving my hand.

Then Hiiragi turned back and went towards the dim alley. Her retreating figure became smaller, blurring into the darkness, then disappeared after turning at the corner.

It was then.

For some reason, I felt like something was missing.

I didn't know why. Still, something felt missing. A strange feeling, as if something that should be here wasn't there anymore.

"… She's a good girl."

"I want to play with her more…"

Said both Sudou and Shuuji honestly, then they started to walk towards their house.

Thought I kinda felt as if I was forced to follow them, I went after them.

After walking for a few minutes, my phone trembled in my blazer's pocket just when we reached the shopping district.

"… Hmm?"

I took my phone out and saw that I had received a message on LINE.

The sender had the nickname “Tokki”. That is to say, Hiiragi.

Tokki: It’s my first message. I hope you have received it

Tokki: Thank you for today. It was fun. It might take some time to open myself up to them, but I’ll try my best

She politely sent a message to thank me.

Her formality really felt like *Tokiko*. I quickly started to type a reply.

Hosono: I have received it. Thank you too. Well, just don’t overdo it

Just after I had sent the message, almost immediately it was marked as read.

That simple indication made the fact that Hiiragi, in a street somewhere, had read my message feel strangely vivid and real.

“… What’s up, Hosono?” asked Sudou, who was ahead of me, with a curious expression as she turned towards me. “You seems happy.”

“What? Really?”

I didn’t realise it at all. Even as I touched my cheeks, my face felt the same as usual.

“Yeah, you really looked like you were in a good mood.”

“… You are imagining things.”

“Oh, really~?”

I put my phone back in my pocket and looked down at the asphalt. I feel irritable and can’t keep my composure when I’m with these two.

However, I noticed.

The feeling that something felt missing that I had when looking at Hiiragi’s back lessened before I knew it.

—*I desire knowledge.*

Knowledge is the converging point and origin of everything.

Thus, by possessing knowledge, I shall monopolise what is dear to me.

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 3 – Tokiko, Nishiogi Vibes

“What, really!? You sure you’re fine with it!?”

“Wow, didn’t expect you to propose something like that. I thought you were the type who didn’t like that sort of thing.”

Morning after arriving to school, Hiiragi was having a talk with Sudou and Shuuji in front of the classroom.

“Y-yes… It’s all right,” agreed Hiiragi without meeting their eyes. “I can’t receive you grandly, but it doesn’t bother me if you come…”

A few weeks after the karaoke event, Sudou and Shuuji were already treating Hiiragi like a friend of theirs. If they saw her in school they would come talk to her, and it seems like they even exchange messages on LINE.

That in itself could be considered good luck. These two were good training partners for Hiiragi. Though it would be a pain if I was in her place.

The problem, though,

“R-really, don’t expect too much…”

Was on Hiiragi’s side. She still had a wall built between her and the others around her.

“It’s just a small and old house, so you might actually be surprised…”

During this casual conversation, she was still on her guard similar to a cat in a new house. Even right now, her expression appeared to be fairly stiff.

──The problem isn't their age, sex or their personality, and even less their appearance. It's just that, if there was only one thing that I could agree to from the bottom of my heart, then certainly, I wouldn't fear anything.

There is this line that appears in "14 Years Old" during a scene where *Tokiko* worries about people's sense of distance.

It might be the reason why she can't get closer to them.

She doesn't have something that she can "agree to from the bottom of her heart". She doesn't have a common ground with them, so no matter how much time passes, the distance between them would remain the same.

But that was obvious, after all, from our perspective, these guys were like aliens. The way we feel, our sense of values, our world view, our view on life, everything was worlds apart.

"… Guess it's my turn."

I rose up from my seat and went towards them. It's a pain to talk to Sudou and Shuuji first thing in the morning, but I can't just leave Hiiragi alone like that.

"What's up, Hiiragi? Being pressured by them?"

The moment I asked that, before Hiiragi could say anything, Sudou opened her mouth:

"Ah! What was that!? This time we're not forcing her to do anything!"

"So you're aware that you usually are forcing her…"

"Umm, we were talking about doing a study group…" Hiiragi started to explain to me. " It's almost the time for midterms, right? So if we were to study all together then we might make some progress…"

“I’m really in trouble~…” said Sudou, frowning miserably. “At the rate I’m going I’m sure to get a few red marks. You can’t just laugh about getting red marks for your first exams of highschool…”

In Miyamae High we have midterms and finals.

As you can guess from their names, they’re tests held in the middle and at the end of the term, and they have a direct impact on our grades. If you get red marks then you’re good to go for the supplementary lessons.

Leaving the superior Shuuji aside, for Sudou who has around the same results as me, this month’s midterms are a pain in the neck. On my side, I had started to study a little to avoid the supplementary lessons.

“If possible I’d love to do something by myself!” said Sudou, starting to justify herself to me for some reason. “When going back home I think about doing this or that subject, really. But, I just can’t concentrate at home… My little brother wants to play with me, or I just end up watching videos on the net, and the day just ends like that…”

“You’re just sloppy…”

“I know!” I unintentionally retorted, so it made Sudou react. “I know that! But I just don’t know what to do!”

“And so, Sudou thought that she might study if there is someone to keep an eye on her,” said Shuuji taking over the explanation. “That’s why she wants to do a study group with everyone. Plus that way we can help each other about the subjects that we’re good at. But we didn’t have a place to do it at. We can’t use Sudou or my house for a while, and when we thought about using the library, Hiiragi proposed that we could use her house.”

“I see, so that’s what happened…”

I think choosing Hiiragi to help with studying is a good choice. Based on her attitude in class she should have good grades. I think she’s one of those “going to a good university type” in Miyamae High.

Still, it was a little surprising.

Sudou's surprise was natural, after all Hiiragi looks like the type who didn't like people coming to her house. In fact, there wasn't a single scene in "14 Years Old" where she invited someone to her house.

I guess she wants to get closer to Sudou and Shuuji as fast as possible. I understand that, but I think that sometimes she's just trying too hard.

"Anyway, open up your schedule, Hosono!" said Sudou, as if it was a matter of course, while I was thinking. "After all, I'm sure you're also in trouble for the tests! Let's help each other out!"

Usually I would be refusing here, but just this time I nodded silently.

I can't leave Hiiragi alone with them, and… In fact, I also wanted to go to her house.

□

A week later.

"Oh, so this is…"

"Yes, it is an old house though, so it's a little embarrassing…"

The four of us were standing in front of a house in the middle of the residential district.

"It's imposing…"

"Yeah, it's kinda cool…"

It was Hiiragi's house, in a calm part of the residential district, around ten minutes by foot from the station.

An old two-storied Japanese style house.

Hiiragi said that it was made during her great-grandfather's generation, so it's probably around fifty or sixty years old. Still, thanks to the building being carefully maintained, rather than "old", it felt "charming". The way the windows and the entranceway were designed was stylish, it was not too extravagant, in fact it felt like a cosy and sweet house. Overall, it was the kind of stylish house that you would see in anime movies.

As for me… as I stood in front of *Tokiko*'s house that was depicted many times in "14 Years Old", it deeply impressed me. Be it *Tokiko* gazing at the Japanese snake gourds outside the window, going on to the roof to look at the stars, lying down in her futon when she felt depressed, or crying after quarrelling with her sister, everything that happened in this house. For the past fifteen years since her birth, this house was the stage where *Tokiko* lived.

"Well… Welcome," said Hiiragi inviting us inside, walking towards the entranceway enclosed in frosted windows.

After looking at the house one last time, I followed them with a jog.

Hiiragi's room was a Japanese styled room on the second floor, at the end of the hallway on the south side.

"Whoa, it's kinda… You know, like a literary master's room…"

Hearing Sudou's words, I deeply nodded in my mind.

Tatami mats you could feel the age from, olive brown bookshelves with countless little scratches. The desk, dresser and even the tea table were antiques with small ornaments. On the wall was a framed oil painting. It looked like a scenery of a rural town, but perhaps it was one of this town from dozens of years ago.

And it didn't look like everything was brought by Hiiragi.

“All the furniture is from my grandmother…” said Hiiragi somehow embarrassed. “She brought them over as her trousseau when marrying, so I think almost everything is around sixty years old…”

“Whoa, the Hiiragi house really gives off the feeling of having a long history. How elegant! Tokki, you prefer furniture like that rather than cute ones?”

“Yes… I think that, in their own way, they’re cute too…”

It’s true that it suited Hiiragi’s image. A quite literature girl living in a Showa era Japanese-style room. In a way, it’s harder to imagine her in a modern room with simple furniture.

Hiiragi sat before the tea table, then we did the same and started preparations to study.

Incidentally, Hiiragi who was seated in front of me was in her plain clothing today.

It was obvious considering that it was a rest day, but it was the first time I saw her like that so I unintentionally ended up staring at her.

A thin white dress coupled with a light grey parka. She didn’t wear any accessory aside from her usual hair ornament and the wristwatch on her left wrist. Just like it said in “14 Years Old” she had no eye problem, so unlike Sudou who immediately put on her glasses she was looking at the textbooks with her naked eyes.

It’s a strange feeling.

Hiiragi has been living in this room since she was a child. From before she was portrayed as *Tokiko* till today, she must have experienced a lot of things here, be it happy things, sad things, enjoyable things or unforgivable things. Just as she must have had a fit of rage here, she may have even done things so embarrassing that she couldn’t possibly tell anyone about them.

The moment I thought that, for some reason I strongly became aware that Hiiragi was in front of me, in the “flesh”.

She wasn’t on stages like the school or the town, but back in her everyday life in her own room. It was the room of a normal girl, where she had lived and grown up in until she became a high school girl.

Perhaps she had noticed my gaze as Hiiragi raised her face and tilted it as if asking me if something was wrong.

And then, for the first time, I realised something that I didn’t really take notice of until now.

That Hiiragi was really pretty.

Of course, I was already aware of her good looks. Even if she didn’t stand out and wasn’t flashy, just based on her base specs I think she would be one of the prettiest girls in our class. However, in a way I looked at Hiiragi too differently, so I couldn’t even think of something so simple subjectively.

And now, looking at her in her room, defencelessly wearing plain clothes, I finally really felt it.

Hiiragi is beautiful. To the point that I could be captivated for hours just by looking at her.

“… Hosono-kun?”

“Ah, s-sorry!”

I finally came back to my senses when she called out to me. My heart was resounding like an alarm bell.

“I-I was just lost in my thoughts…”

“If you say so…” answered Hiiragi.

As for Sudou and Shuuji, they were looking at us curiously.

Immediately after we started, Sudou attacked Hiiragi with a barrage of questions.

“Tokki, can you help me with this?”

“Sure.”

“The part that’s asking what ‘that kind of half intentional mistake’ shows… Like, there’s so many difficult words in it I don’t get anything…”

“A-aah… You don’t really need to understand what it means… You just need to take these two as connected, then you’ll be able to solve the problem…” said Hiiragi bending over Sudou’s textbook. “Look here, ‘that kind of’ here refers to the previous sentence, right? Then the previous sentence is… here it is, it’s connected to the ‘in other words’ here, so──”

Matching her looks, Hiiragi was good with modern Japanese. She explained the method to answer Sudou’s question logically and clearly. I really think that it’s impressive to be able to verbalise things that most people just do intuitively. She might be pretty popular if she became a teacher at a cram school.

Still,

“Aaaah, It’s difficult. So you mean that as long as I pay attention to these parts then I don’t need to read the text?”

“Y-yes, but, umm, sorry for not being able to explain it well…”

Hiiragi wore her usual stiff expression.

I had expected the usually nervous Hiiragi to be able to relax at her own house and so I thought it would be a good chance for her to open up her heart.

But it was the usual. Hiiragi was talking with Sudou with a stiff expression like always.

"… What should I do…" I muttered with a sigh.

It seems that Hiiragi's shyness is pretty hardcore and won't be changing that easily. If there isn't a good occasion, it most likely won't get better.

□

"Aaaaaah, so tiiired…"

The instant we decided to take a ten minutes break, Sudou threw herself onto the tea table and let out a pitiful voice.

"I did a month worth of studying, maybe I'll get full marks…"

"You won't get full marks by studying only an hour," said Shuuji smiling bitterly.

"And we only revised a single subject," continued Hiiragi, troubled, as she looked at Sudou.

I'm pretty sure that Hiiragi can't understand Sudou's feelings. She has a pretty high level of concentration after all. In "14 Years Old" too it's described that she can study for hours.

A common point.

Suddenly, I remembered these words.

Hiiragi and Sudou don't have any common point.

No matter how you look at it, they're very different. The things with the furniture earlier for example. Sudou, or any average highschool girl, would prefer girlish furniture.

But that isn’t the case for Hiiragi.

She thinks that the furniture in her room are cute, reads Japanese literature, can analyse and understand texts as well as concentrate on her studies for hours.

They don’t have a single common point. Their tastes are incompatible.

So in the end, perhaps it’s impossible for them to get closer.

… But is that really the case?

That question remained in my mind.

Is it really impossible for the two of them to understand each other?

True, they’re different types of people. Because they live in the same town and go to the same school they could meet, but other than that their personalities, hobbies, way of life and also their way of thinking are too different.

Still, there must be something in common between them. Something that will get them closer.

Then, I realised.

If there really is something, then I’m the one who should be able to find it.

I gave up socialising with people. I’m not trying to get closer to them, nor am I trying to get to know their feelings, or even to read the mood.

Nevertheless, I did read “14 Years Old” several times this past year, and I’ve been around Sudou and Shuuji since we were kids. If someone can find their common point, then it’s me.

… Oh well, guess I have to do this. Let’s think about it a little more.

Sudou and Shuuji aside, I wanted to at least grant Hiiragi’s wish if possible.

I folded my arms and started to recall things about them. What they like, what they hate, what they are good at, what they are bad at, what they are confident in, what they are not confident in, how did they live…

Then suddenly, someone's phone started to vibrate.

"… Ah, it's my sister," murmured Sudou as she checked her phone. "Uh-huh… What to choose… Maybe fried chicken…"

Sudou quickly replied.

And as I saw that, everything came together.

There is one, an answer to the problem.

A common point between them.

"A mail from your sister?" I asked Sudou the moment she finished writing her answer.

"Ah, yep. About what I wanted to eat for dinner."

"I see. By the way, how is she recently? Doing fine?"

"… Why the sudden questions? Well, yeah, she's fine," answered Sudou a little puzzled.

"Good to know, just that I thought that you didn't talk about her these days. Still an amateur model?"

"Yep. Recently she's been doing amazing. She's going to a lot of photo shoots, and she even appeared on a adverts on TV."

"I see… Come to think of it, Hiiragi didn't know that," I said looking towards Hiiragi who looked interested. "Sudou's big sis is a celebrity. Around highschool she started modeling in a magazine, and she's still appearing frequently."

“W-whoa, a model…” while being bewildered, Hiiragi showed her admiration honestly. “It’s amazing… people like them really exist…”

“Yeah, she’s tall, stylish and pretty, exactly what you imagine when you think about models. She even had a fanclub back in middle school──”

“Stop talking about her!”

Sudou glared at me displeased. Rather than angry, it looked like she felt down.

“I have a complex about it. Even though my sister is so pretty, I’m like this…”

“T-that’s not true… Sudou-san, you’re so cute I’m envious…”

“You’re the only one saying that, Tokki…”

“… But it’s true that it’s difficult when you have someone competent in your family,” said Shuuji, who’s been looking at the development of the conversation silently, as he smiled wryly.

“Ah, yeah, in your case it’s your father who’s amazing, right?”

Shuuji nodded to my question a little troubled.

“My dad is the head of a company…”

“The head… So he’s the president?”

“Yeah. Though not a big one, just a normal IT company. He had big ambitions since his youth, so he really studied a lot to start up a business. So from his point of view, it looks like I have no ambitions… He’s been kinda strict with me because of that.”

I met, or rather saw, Shuuji’s father a few times.

He was always busily working before his computer while wearing a suit.

Shuuji always yearned to be like him, but in his mind he knew that he couldn't become "like that". That's why, instead of going to the best school of the region Shuuji decided to go to Miyamae High, because he wanted to try going a different way than being an elite.

"I see, everyone has it tough…" murmured Hiiragi, thinking about something.

"…Hiiragi," I started to speak to give her a little push. "What about you? Anything about your family?"

"Something about my family…"

As she thought about it, she suddenly made an expression like she just found something.

Then, turning towards Sudou and Shuuji,

"Umm… My sister is amazing," she started. "She's ten years older than me and already an adult… Also, she's a novelist."

"Eh!? Awesome!"

"Really!?"

It seems that it managed to have caught their interest as Sudou and Shuuji bent forward.

"Yes, it's true. What's more, it seems her work is getting praised more and more recently… Even today, she went to a reunion with her editor…"

"Haaa, yeah, I guess it happens…" nodded Shuuji, impressed. "And here I thought that succeeding as an author was pretty difficult."

"But you see, because I had such a sister I always had a complex too."

Even in "14 Years Old" *Tokiko* was always aware of her sister.

The older sister who had many things that she didn't. She was excellent, had talent and was sociable. As a reader, I felt like *Tokiko* became an introvert because of how amazing her sister was.

And Sudou as well as Shuuji had a complex with their excellent families.

This is surely one of their few common points. It's a little cruel one, but we have to use it.

"So I guess we're the 'Inferior in their Family Alliance'…" said Sudou making an expression like booing. And yet, she looked strangely happy.

"Yeah."

"It seems so," agreed Hiiragi while smiling.

Yeah, she smiled. Hiiragi smiled at Sudou and Shuuji.

Her expression was softer and more natural than the stiff expression that she had until now.

Anyway, it went well, so I'm relieved.

Of course, it's not perfect. Hiiragi's still going to be nervous around them. Still, just with this she did get one step closer to them. Now she just needs to get closer little by little.

After all, *Tokiko*, that is to say Hiiragi, said it herself: "If there was only one thing I could agree to from the bottom of my heart, then certainly, I wouldn't fear anything."

Feeling a certain feeling of satisfaction, I took out a bottle of tea from my bag and took a sip.

On the side, Hiiragi and the other two continued to talk about their families.

The tea's fragrance spread in my mouth, then it went through my throat before landing in my stomach. Because of my sense of satisfaction it felt strangely sweet.

But, only around my stomach did I feel a dull pain.

A tightening, irritating, strange sensation.

What is this? Did I eat something bad? I thought, stroking my stomach, but… I was wrong, it wasn't there where it hurt.

It was above. It hurt around my chest.

Why? I've had a healthy body for the past 15 years. I don't have any diseases. So then why? Why does my chest hurt? Did I pile up stress by being with Sudou and Shuuji?

"Considering that, Hosono has it easy!" Sudou suddenly turned the conversation my way. "He doesn't have any siblings and got a really cute kitten. It's unfair!"

"Oh, you have a kitten…" Hiiragi bent forward, interested. "I would like to see it… What is its name?"

"Shishamo."

"Shishamo…" said Hiiragi. Then after repeating it in a murmur a few times, "It's a nice name."

"Really? The name is from my dad, and I'm not particularly fond of it… Also, it's not a kitten anymore. You last saw her three years ago, now she's an adult."

"What, really!?"

"Even though she was so little she could fit in my hand!"

Sudou and Shuuji were really surprised. It's true that when she was a kitten they really loved playing with her. But I stopped inviting them over so they didn't meet her after that, so I guess inside them she's still the cute kitten that she was before.

“Back then Shishamo really hated Hosono! She would hiss at him just because he approached her!”

“Aah, yeah that happened.”

Sudou and Shuuji smiled recalling the past.

“She was more friendly with us! She climbed on our laps and purred.”

“That was cute. We also played with toys. Though Hosono was a little pitiful left on the side.”

“Hey there, we reconciled long ago. Now she even uses my bed to sleep.”

“Seriously!? I guess even cats have a change of heart!” exclaimed Sudou. “How nice, to be able to sleep with Shishamo…”

“Sometimes she gets a little wild during the night so it wakes me up though… Umm? What’s up, Hiiragi?”

I noticed Hiiragi looking down lonely.

“No, it’s nothing… It’s just that…”

“… That?”

“The three of you have been getting along since the past…”

“Well, yeah, in the past.”

The moment I said that, Sudou raised her voice dissatisfied.

“Don’t just put it in the past! In the present right now, and in the future too, we’ll always be childhood friends!”

“Ahaha…” laughed Hiiragi with a somehow lonely expression. Then she muttered to herself, “How nice, I envy that…”

□

“Thanks for today!” said Sudou at the entranceway, smiling at Hiiragi. “Tokki’s lecture really helped me! Getting full marks isn’t a dream anymore!”

“Ahaha, full marks is still a little too difficult.”

“Let’s do that again. Next time you can come to my house,” said Shuuji with an actor-like smile.

“Yes, it’d be nice. Let’s talk about it again before the finals,” answered Hiiragi smiling slightly back at him.

In the end we studied until just before dinner time with a few breaks in between.

Thanks to that Sudou managed to briefly revise modern Japanese, as well as mathematics and English at which she is bad. We also could review with each other about the things that we weren’t sure about.

I think it was a pretty effective revision before the tests.

Hiiragi made a pretty big step forward, and I feel like I had a meaningful day for the first time in a while. For today at least I should thank Sudou and Shuuji.

Maybe I should say something to them as thanks, I thought as I put on my sneakers.

Sudou and Shuuji were waiting for me, bathed in the evening sun light coming from the windows on the side of the entranceway. Somehow it made me remember when we went back home together in primary school.

Then suddenly, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I took it out and looked at the screen:

Tokki: Would you like to meet my sister?

I raised my face in a snap.

Hiiragi was writing something on her phone.

Then another message came:

Tokki: I told her that a friend who likes “14 Years Old” is at home, then she said that she really wanted to meet you

My heart went full throttle to this unexpected development.

Would you like to meet my sister?

That is to say, to meet the author of “14 Years Old”, Hiiragi Tokoro.

“Aaah, s-sorry!” I reflexively raised my voice. “Well… I forgot that Hiiragi was supposed to lend me a book after that!”

“Eh, really?”

“Yeah, so you can go ahead as it’ll take a little time.”

“Okay~” Sudou agreed easily, then smirked at me. “Still, taking time for reading, you’re so composed~. You’re going to get failing marks.”

“Don’t be too sure of yourself.”

Saying their piece, Sudou and Shuuji went away waving their hands while saying “Bye”.

Now only the two of us were left.

"… Y-you sure about it?" I asked nervously. "Your sister… Hiiragi Tokoro-san, she's working, no? Yet to give me some of her time… Somehow… It kinda feels awesome."

I read hundreds of books. I always had books with me since I was a kid, and it's not an exaggeration to say that the me of today was shaped up by books.

And now, you say that I can meet an author, what's more the one of a book I really like? I could never have dreamt of that.

"You don't need to mind it that much. She's the one who wants to meet you, and the meeting should finish soon," said Hiiragi pretty easily.

Looking at her attitude, I finally actually felt that she was Hiiragi Tokoro's sister.

"Okay…" I nodded and took a breath to calm myself down. Then a few seconds later, as casually as possible I said, "Well, guess I'll accept the offer then…"

You might ask where is the guy who tried to avoid people, that I'm just a fanboy treating celebrities differently. But I really wanted to know who was the person who could write a novel that could fascinate me so much.

"Yes, no problem."

The moment Hiiragi nodded, the door at the end of the hallway on the other side of the living room opened. A man with an amiable look appeared from it. Then he noticed Hiiragi in the entranceway.

"Oh, Tokiko-chan, hello. You were here."

I think he must be in the later half of his twenties. He held a bag in his left hand, and a phone in his right. He was probably the editor in charge of Hiiragi Tokoro.

"Yes, I was waiting for the meeting to end."

“I see, sorry to have taken so long… The young man here is your friend?”

“… Yes, he is my classmate.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Nonomura, from the first editorial department of Machida Edition,” said the man smiling at me. “Still, for Tokiko-chan to make a friend, it’s really moving. I hope you get along with her.”

“Aah, yes…”

“Well then, I should get going.”

Only saying this much, Mr.Nonomura opened the door of the entrance way and went out from the Hiiragi residence.

“All right, let’s go,” said Hiiragi after locking the door. “I’m sure my sister is eager to meet you.”

□

It was a workshop.

Yeah, if I had to give my first impression, it was like a witch’s workshop.

I was dumbfounded by the sight before my eyes as I entered Hiiragi Tokoro’s workroom.

There were bookshelves standing against each wall, packed with Japanese literature, Western literature, photo magazines, manuals, novels, shoujo manga, shounen manga, seinen manga and even adult manga.

But it wasn’t only the bookshelves. Towers made of countless books were around the floor, and I could see the heroine on the cover of a light novel on top of one of them. Apparently Hiiragi Tokoro is an extreme reader, reading indiscriminately from a wide variety of genres.

And in the back of the room was an antique kneehole desk with the latest model computer on top of it.

The high class office chair before it turned our way.

“Hey, so it’s you,” said the seated woman, smiling at me theatrically. “Hosono-kun, was it? Sorry for calling you, but I wanted to meet you at least once.”

I understood that she was Hiiragi’s older sister at a glance.

She said she’s ten years older, so she should be twenty five or six. She had black, cat-like eyes, a small, straight nose and peach coloured lips, which wasn’t that different from Hiiragi. You could almost call them lookalikes.

But she had wavy, long hair. She wore a black dress on her tall womanly figure.

And above all, she had such a sex appeal that you would almost feel dizzy even from afar, which was totally different from Hiiragi’s purity.

I’m sure Femme Fatale designs women like her. It wasn’t like she exposed a lot of skin, or wore more makeup than necessary, but the woman before my eyes, Hiiragi Tokoro had such an appeal you would step back instinctively when seeing her. I imagined novelists as sensitive and gentle people. Even more so for “14 Years Old”’s author, I thought that she would be a delicate, pure and innocent woman. To think that she would be someone like that…

“I heard from Tokiko,” I came back to my senses hearing her clear voice. “That you really like ‘14 Years Old’. It’s an extreme honour to have my work be read by a young man like you. You could even say that I’m getting more than I deserve as a novelist. Thank you.”

“N-no, it’s nothing! R-rather, I’m the one who should thank you for writing such an amazing novel… I’m really glad to have been able to read it,” I answered nervously, trying my best to continue to speak. “I really like ‘14 Years Old’, to the point that, without exaggerating, I read it everyday. I can

really empathise with *Tokiko*'s feelings… Really, it's the first time a novel made me think like that."

Hiiragi Tokoro giggled and said with a smile, "You say really pleasant things. It might be the first time that I've been praised so much directly."

Looking at her smiling face, I could feel my body being taken up by a whirlpool of feelings.

First, nervousness and then excitement.

The author of my favorite novel is right before me. She recognises me, and is pleased by my words. This fact made me have butterflies in my stomach and I felt heat within my eyes.

But at the same time, I felt a considerable sense fear and wariness.

This woman wrote "14 Years Old".

She minutely analysed Hiiragi Tokiko, a middle school girl, and made a story about her. That's not something a normal person can do. She really is a witch, and using something, like magic, she wrote Hiiragi inside a book.

And the eyes of the witch were currently looking at me.

Her black eyes that seemed to see through everything were piercing right through me.

I wonder how far she can see? If she can see everything like with *Tokiko*, then I wonder how she's seeing me?

Of course, in fact, it's not like she knows everything about Hiiragi. When she wrote "14 Years Old", she properly collected data about Hiiragi. Every night she would ask how her sister passed her day and wrote a large quantity of notes. Apparently Hiiragi was against it at first, but after being zealously persuaded, she decided to help.

That's why, Hiiragi Tokoro isn't actually seeing through everything about me.

In theory, I understood that.

But emotionally, I felt a strong feeling of unease, having goosebumps all over my body, signaling that I should stand at alert in front of danger.

“Now, don’t be so nervous,” said Hiiragi Tokoro with a smile. “I’m not going to bite you, nor appraise you. You should relax a little.”

“Y-yes…”

Still, didn’t she just get the reason of my unease…?

I don’t know how much I can lower my guard before her.

“Well then Hosono-kun, how is it? Is Tokiko doing fine at school?”

“… Well,” carefully choosing my words I started to answer. “At first, as you would expect, she was quite on her guard, but recently she made some friends and they seem to be getting along…”

Well, rather than recently, more like today.

The moment I remembered that, I once again felt pain in my chest.

I reflexively put my right hand on my chest.

“Hmm…” Hiiragi Tokoro started to stare at my face. “… Excellent, you’re making a really nice expression. It’s really pleasing me.”

“R-really?…”

I didn’t understand what she meant.

A nice expression? Me? Right now I’m making a nice expression? Impossible.

Unless she meant that my expression as I was suffering from the pain in my chest was nice in bad taste. That or she’s just making fun of me.

“By the way, I think you heard about it from Tokiko, but I’m currently writing the sequel of ‘14 Years Old’. Of course, it’ll still be about *Tokiko*.”

“Yes, she told me…”

“As for the period, I’m thinking about the starting of her entrance to highschool. So what I want to say is that in the sequel,” Hiiragi Tokoro made a bewitching smile. “You’re going to appear in a way or another.”

I was at a loss for words.

I’ll appear in “14 Years Old”’s sequel.

I’ll be a character inside it.

I almost reflexively let out a gleeful voice.

I met the heroine of my favourite novel, then met the author, and finally now I’m about to appear in the sequel. As a fan, can I even be happier?

Hiiragi Tokoro is going to write about me. I’m going to be represented in her literary style.

I got goosebumps just thinking about it.

How will it be? How is she going to describe me?

… Thinking about it, my happiness changed to unease.

Yeah… That’s the problem. How will Hiiragi Tokoro describe me?

Unlike Hiiragi, I don’t have any appeal. I’m not pure like her, just a normal highschool boy who can’t adapt himself to his surroundings. I can’t imagine how someone like me could appear in the story.

In the first place, is it even fine for me to appear inside the story? Am I even worth it?

At least, I don’t think I am.

If I appear, won't *Tokiko*'s story lose a little of its appeal?…

"Like I said, you don't need to be so nervous," said Hiiragi Tokoro, giggling a little. "I don't intend to write badly about you. In the first place, we can't publish the book without your permission. Only after letting you read the script and getting approval can we proceed to publication. You don't need to be reserved, if you're against it, just say it. It's my personal judgment as an author to use you in my story, so of course I'll take responsibility. Still, I have to say," she crossed her legs and peered at my face. "You're really pleasing me. You're a cute one, Hosono-kun. Not as cute as Tokiko, but still almost as much as her. That's why, I really want you to appear a little in the story."

"Onee-chan," Hiiragi, silent until now, raised her voice. I felt a little displeasure mixed in her voice as she said, "Stop saying that so easily… Being cute and such…"

Something extremely unusual happened, Hiiragi was angry.

So she can even make that sort of expression… Even though she rarely let out a smile and is usually just expressionless or has a troubled expression.

"You're right, I'm sorry," said Hiiragi Tokoro, waving her hand as if to sweep what she just said away. "Anyway, Hosono-kun, you don't mind if I write about you, right? Like I said, I'll ask your permission before the final step."

"Umm, well… I don't mind."

"Thanks. Well then, time for me to get to work. I have to say, though, I have the feeling that we'll have another talk about *Tokiko* somewhere."

"Err, if you say so…"

"Of course I am," Hiiragi Tokoro nodded and smiled daringly. "I'm looking forward to that time with great pleasure."

□

“I’m sorry, my sister is a little eccentric…” said Hiiragi downhearted as we walked towards the station. “When someone pleases her she strangely gets in high spirits… Even though she’s usually more quiet…”

“Err, well, it’s fine…” I replied vaguely, still shocked by what happened. “It wasn’t disagreeable…”

She really was someone intense.

It was the first time I felt like I was in the palm of someone like that. To think that the person who wrote a pure story like “14 Years Old” was like that… I guess I kinda was in high spirits to meet her, but she left a very strong impression.

What’s more, it seems that I really pleased her. So she wasn’t just teasing me when acting like that.

I don’t understand why I would, though, and if I were asked if I’m glad about it, I wouldn’t be able to fully agree. Still, it’s better than being hated. It’d be pretty annoying to make an enemy of her.

“Also… thank you for today,” said Hiiragi next to me, raising her hung head. “I finally felt like I could become friends with Sudou-san and Shuuji-kun. Back then, when you talked about families… it was to help me, right?”

“… Well, I didn’t do that much.”

“Still, I was really glad. Thank you,” said Hiiragi, sincere gratitude oozing from her voice.

But Hiiragi didn’t know my true intentions.

That I just wanted to be by her side.

It’s not like I don’t want to help her and make her happy. Still, more than that, I wanted to appeal to her about the merits of having me by her side. That’s why, it wasn’t out of some good intentions, but more like a selfish action done for my own interest.

Letting out a small sigh, I looked at the sky. Right now the sinking sun was peeking through the crevice between the buildings.

The orange sky in the west, the blue indigo sky in the east and the white clouds blended together to form a complex marble like pattern in the sky. A spectacle suitable for what was coming after the epilogue of “14 Years Old”, to the point that I was fine even if the world were to be destroyed right now.

Then, I suddenly noticed.

Maybe I’m feeling like that because Hiiragi is next to me.

Hiiragi was holding down her skirt because of the blowing wind of May. For some reason, when I’m with her, the amplitude of my emotions endlessly becomes bigger and bigger.

“… Umm, can I ask you something?” asked Hiiragi, reservedly.

“What is it?”

“Hosono-kun, you were close to Sudou-san and Shuuji-kun in the past, right? You played and went home together, no?”

The palpitations of my heart increased a little due to the sudden question.

“… Well, yeah, there was a time we did that,” I answered, trying to appear as calm as possible. “When you’re a kid, you don’t really care about what kind of people the others are, right? But when you become a high school student you start to mind it, that’s why I think our current relationship is fine.”

“I-I see…” Hiiragi only said that then she stopped talking.

But after walking a few steps:

“I thought that perhaps something happened…” she said timidly, hanging her head like a scolded child. “How to say… it doesn’t look like you naturally got distant from them. It looks like you were the one to clearly show your stance, then they decided to act based on this…”

Her sharp remark startled me.

But thinking about it, it shouldn’t be difficult to see through this for *Tokiko* considering the sensitivity she shows in “14 Years Old”.

Then Hiiragi raised her face and told me, who couldn’t find any excuse:

“That’s why I thought… that perhaps something happened to make things like they are now…”

Something happened.

Hearing these words, unpleasant memories flashed in my mind.

I tried to seal them away so that I wouldn’t recall the bitter regret as much as possible.

Noticing the change in my expression, Hiiragi became flustered.

“U-umm, it’s fine if you don’t want to tell! I’m sorry for being insensitive… It’s just that, I was curious… I, err…” Hiiragi lowered her voice to an almost inaudible level, “I want… to know more about you… Hosono-kun.”

Looking at her cornered expression, I finally noticed. That I never talked about myself to Hiiragi.

Thanks to “14 Years Old”, I know most of Hiiragi’s life. I even know what she usually thinks about. Not only that, I also know her complexes, her worries, the novels, songs, paintings, films she likes, and even the pattern of her underwears. In contrast, the only thing Hiiragi knows about me is that I like “14 Years Old”.

I want to tell her.

I don’t know if I have the right to talk to her about it.

After all, should someone who gave up on human relationships really want to talk?

But I wanted our relationship to be fair, and I had the feeling of wanting her to listen to me somewhere in my heart. If it’s now, I felt like I could talk about it.

“… Those two have always been popular,” I opened my mouth, recalling the past. “Lot of friends, popular with the opposite sex, trusted by the teachers… Well, not really different from now. Anyway, the thing is that because we were always together, I misunderstood something. I thought that I was popular like them. That I had the power to move people,” I said, laughing at myself.

Me? Like them? Be it consideration for people, ability to communicate, popularity, looks, all things necessary to social interactions, nothing about me even reached their feet.

Hiiragi opened her mouth trying to say something. But perhaps she thought it was better to listen to me, she closed it and looked at me.

“Still, even someone like me noticed that something was weird by the end of primary school. Even though everything goes smoothly when they talk, when I do it doesn’t. Thinking about it, it was surely because I only said things which weren’t going with the flow of the conversation. But the me back then didn’t notice that. Well, I also think the others were kind enough to follow-up with what I said, making it harder to notice. And then, during our last year, *she* was in the same class as us.”

“*She*…? Who?”

“A girl called Ashiya.”

Just saying her name made me feel bitter.

I really didn’t want to continue to talk. But I couldn’t just stop here.

“Ashiya looked and acted like a boy, tall and good with sports. That’s why, even though we were at the age when it was starting to get complicated with the opposite sex, we could get along with her. Saying things like ‘You’re basically a guy!’.”

I think even she liked it when we said that. I mean, even leaving me who couldn’t read the mood back then aside, Sudou and Shuuji said it too, and there were times when Ashiya herself made us say that. That’s why, that part at least wasn’t wrong.

“And yet, one day, when I said the same thing as usual, she suddenly started to cry.”

“Eh, why…?”

“The thing is that just before that Ashiya was rejected by the boy she liked. Reason being… that he could only see her as a boy.”

“…”

Hiiragi’s expression warped, as if she could see the scene in front of her.

“It startled me. I didn’t understand why she would cry. After all, she was usually full of energy. I didn’t know what to do, so I just kept apologising. And yet, she didn’t stop. Anyway, I only understood after the fact that everyone noticed that Ashiya was feeling down. They knew she liked a boy in our class, so they guessed what had happened. When everyone was trying to be kind to her that day, I was the only one to call her a boy as usual.”

Hiiragi listened to me silently.

“The girls in the class got angry and said I was cruel. Then they said that: ‘Sudou-san and Hiroo-kun were considerate to her, and yet Hosono-kun didn’t notice at all’. After that, though late, I could only notice it. That I had bad social interaction skills. That maybe, I hurt many other people too.”

Hiiragi bite her lip, looking pained.

“I was shocked. I know I wasn’t in the position to be, but I was. I liked everyone. It was fun to be with everyone, I was happy, and I wished it would always stay like that. But, that guy playing the idiot to make everyone laugh, the meddlesome class president-like girl, the carefree, soothing girl, that serious guy too… maybe I hurt them all with my words. Perhaps they were all just putting up with me. I noticed that. That’s why… there was only one thing I could do.”

──Not getting close to anyone.

Keep the conversations and the committee work to the minimum, not joining any club. Same for my human relations, keep them as small as possible.

That day, it became my policy.

“And that’s why,” I started to say showing a smile to Hiiragi. I thought it was a good forced smile for someone who decided to change himself, but I don’t know how she saw it. “I took some distance from those two, didn’t talk to my classmates as much as possible, and tried to live quietly on my own.”

“… I see,” muttered Hiiragi, looking at the tip of her toes. “Something like that happened…”

Silence descended between us. Conversely, I became more aware of the noises in the residential area.

The sound of the bike from the evening newspaper delivery man. Sound from someone playing piano, two dogs barking at each other. The announcement of the evening news programme coming out from a house on the side.

“… Umm, sorry,” I apologised, unable to bear with the silence. “I’d love to have a more cheerful past to speak of… but I don’t really have the memories necessary.”

“… Please, that’s not true,” said Hiiragi shaking her head, her hair swaying along.

Then suddenly, she made an expression as if she just got an idea.

“‘*By possessing knowledge, I shall monopolise what is dear to me*’,” she said before giggling.

“… T-that’s…”

“Yes… Haaa… It’s really embarrassing… To say something I said in the novel out loud… But that’s how I feel… Now, a part of Hosono-kun is already mine…”

That line came directly from “14 Years Old”, said by *Tokiko* herself.

Hiiragi’s white cheeks were tinged red, and her mouth relaxed. I couldn’t tell if it was because she was embarrassed, or because she was smiling.

“I’m sorry for making you say something that you would rather not… I’m sure you didn’t really have the occasion to talk about it to anyone until now… right?”

“… Yeah. Or rather, it was the first time I talked about it so clearly.”

“I see, the first time…” Hiiragi smiled at me. “Thank you for telling me.”

I reflexively squinted, looking at Hiiragi’s expression with the setting sun behind her.

Hiiragi is trying to cheer me up.

Hiiragi, who is bad with people and can’t even talk to our classmates, was trying her best to cheer me up, even going as far as to quote a line from “14 Years Old”.

And thinking about it made me feel incomprehensibly exalted.

My palpitations accelerated instantly. My heart felt tighter than it should.

And as pathetic as it was, even my hand holding my bag started to tremble.

“You know, Hosono-kun… I don’t know how to say it, but… I don’t think you are someone who should distance himself… who should abandon getting along with people.”

“… Really?”

“Yes. It’s true that Sudou-san and Shuuji-kun are amazing… Still, it’s easier and more enjoyable for me to talk with you, Hosono-kun. Also… I want to be with you…”

I felt a lump in my throat hearing her words.

“I mean… You made that choice, to be distant from everyone, because you wanted to live beautifully, right? I don’t know if it’s the right answer. It might be wrong. Still, beauty has nothing to do with right and wrong. I like people who live beautifully more than the ones trying to be right.”

To live beautifully.

Tokiko said that many times in “14 Years Old”.

“… Oh yeah, you want to live beautifully, Hiiragi…”

“I’ve been quite shameful recently, though,” said Hiiragi, then she smiled. “You said you weren’t popular, Hosono-kun, but… To me, at least… You’re popular, so I think that you should have a little more confidence in yourself…”

“… That’s some small scale popularity,” I replied, trying to appear as calm as possible.

“… Not satisfied?”

I turned around, and standing before me was Hiiragi with an unexpected serious expression.

She looked at me with her dark eyes. Her long eyelashes were forming a shadow over her cheeks, and her irises were shining like the starry sky.

I couldn't think straight anymore.

Not able to think about clever words, I just said what I thought:

"I-I am…"

"Phew… I'm glad…"

As she said that, Hiiragi bumped my shoulder.

I felt her soft upper arm through our clothes along the blunt impact. My chest tightened because of the smell of her shampoo tickling my nose.

Let's admit it.

I can only admit it now.

I know the reason for the pain in my chest.

I knew from the start. The outcome was unavoidable.

The heroine from the novel I like appeared before me. She wished for my help.

As time passed with me by her side, we got closer and she started to think about me as someone important to her.

With things like that, it's impossible to just be friends.

It's impossible to not fall in love.

"Next time I want to meet Shishamo," said Hiiragi, standing still.

Her face, illuminated by the setting sun, was dyed bright red.

──Illusions! They're only illusions! Having your heart throb, breathing heavily, having your breath cut, they're all impossible in real life. Using my sodden fingers to wipe the mist on the window, I could now see red Japanese snake gourds hanging on the tree in the corner of the garden.

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 4 – The Donkey, The King, And Me

“You know, dogs are originally animals who lived in groups!” said Sudou fervently, picking up a cherry tomato with a little fork from her lunch box. “The members of the pack are your family, so when you’re in trouble they help you, when then praise you you’re happy, and when you’re away from them you feel lonely. It was like that for our dog Leo! But cats are different!”

“But I think the way they keep their distance is fine,” replied Shuuji with a vague smile, pausing a little to eat a mouthful of his bread. “Neither close nor distant, just living their lives as they want. Also, recently there was a study explaining that while dogs understand that humans are different from them, cats think that humans are cats too. I think it’s nice that they see us like that.”

In front of me was Hiiragi, listening to both of them while nimbly eating with her chopsticks.

Since the day of the test we’ve been eating together like this. Sudou and Shuuji would come once the fourth period ended, and we would eat while chatting until the fifth period.

Of course, the one who did most of the talking was Sudou, then Shuuji, then,

“Umm, how did they perform the study…?” asked Hiiragi, who had become more talkative. “How did they check that cats see humans as cats…”

“Ah, yeah, it was written in the article if I remember correctly… They compared how cats and dogs acted between each other, and how they acted with humans. The result was that cats act the same with humans as they do with other cats, while dogs behave differently than they do with other dogs.”

“I see…”

“I don’t know how true it is, though. Just something I read in a web article.”

“But you know!” exclaimed Sudou after swallowing her cherry tomato.

After going through the midterms without failing any subject, she went back to her usual energetic self.

“That means that dogs are smarter! They’re the ones who’re right after all! So they’re cuter!”

“Smart doesn’t equal cute, you know.”

“The smarter they are, the easier it is to understand each other!”

“… Hosono-kun,” Hiiragi stopped using her chopsticks and looked at me while tilting her head. “Which one do you like between dogs and cats?”

I felt a pain in my chest.

It’s been happening since that day. Each time Hiiragi looked at me and talked to me, my chest hurt and I lost my words.

What’s more, she just said the word “like”.

Even I think I’m an idiot. I know it wasn’t said with “that meaning”. Still, just hearing that word from her made me lose my calm.

“… Cats, I guess? You have Shishamo after all…”

Perhaps she became uneasy because of my silence, Hiiragi looked at my face.

Her smooth black hair swayed. Her almond shaped eyes were looking at me.

"… No, not really," I managed to answer after calming myself by drinking my lemon tea. "True we're keeping a cat at home, but… That's because my mother picked him up. If she picked up a dog, I'd be fine with it too…"

Honestly, I didn't care. I didn't actually listen to the conversation.

I was more preoccupied with Hiiragi's lips as she ate a piece of broccoli in front of me, so I didn't have room to think about something else.

"Ah, it's here, the 'I can't choose'! There's always someone who can't decide for himself!"

"But I think that most people are the same. After all, both cats and dogs are cute."

"I admit that's true! Still, I can't agree with the recent cat trend! The cuteness levels of cats and dogs didn't change at all, so why are cats treated better!"

"You're right, recently cats have been more popular. Even on TV, there's often some show about them…"

Hiiragi has changed considerably since I met her.

Hiiragi, who once couldn't talk with anyone and just read alone in the classroom. Now, she was talking like that with Sudou and Shuuji, two people completely different from her..

Of course, these two are special. She probably can't be like that with anyone. Still, thanks to them Hiiragi will be able to broaden her relationships, and eventually be able to talk to more people.

I'm happy about that, but it makes me feel a little lonely too.

True, I was the one who made things turn this way. Still, little by little, our secret relationship, this situation where I was able to keep her to myself,

will end.

If Hiiragi's wish is granted.

If she can act normally with people, get more friends, and be able to live cheerfully like Sudou and Shuuji.

Would she still talk to me?

Would she still say it's fun being with me?

"As long as you like them, it's fine, isn't it?!"

Sudou's words startled me. Had I been thinking out loud?

"Who cares about trends! If there's a naked mole-rats boom, then people are going to say that naked mole-rats are the cutest!?"

Oh right, we were just talking about preferences in animals…

I thought she read my thoughts for an instant. Not that it's possible.

Still, what Sudou said is true. People are fine liking what they want. Thinking about the others comes after that.

But I couldn't make up my mind so easily. I really couldn't deny feeling loneliness and uneasiness as I witnessed the changing Hiiragi.

"… I rather like naked mole-rats, though…" said Hiiragi, causing Sudou and Shuuji to look at her strangely. "W-what… I'm the only one?"

"… Tokki, you really have strange tastes," replied Sudou, putting her hand on Hiiragi's shoulder while looking at her with a pitying smile.

"U-umm, Hosono-kun."

A little after Sudou and Shuuji went back to their classroom, leaving the dogs vs cats battle unfinished, Hiiragi started talking to me just before the fifth period started.

“Y-yeah, what is it?”

“E-err, is your next Sunday free…?”

“Sunday? Yeah, I didn’t plan anything…”

“I see… Then, hmm, would you like to go out together?”

“Y-yeah. Though, shouldn’t you have asked earlier when the other two were here? It’s more likely for them to have something planned than me.”

“… Ah, err, no, that’s not what I meant,” Hiiragi looked down a little, then at me with an enquiring look. “Umm… Just the two of us…”

I caught my breath.

Just the two of us. Without Sudou and Shuuji.

Why? We always went out with the four of us, never just Hiiragi and me. Why would she suddenly ask that?

“… I-it’s fine if you don’t want to! I don’t want to force you…” said Hiiragi. Then she added as if trying to explain herself, “Erm… There is a café I want to go to, and you can read novels and other things like that here, so I thought that only you would have an interest in it…”

“Ah, I see.”

I finally understood. True, Sudou and Shuuji wouldn’t be interested in a café like that. Rather than them, she would be more at ease with a book lover like me.

“Okay. I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you,” said Hiiragi with a smile, a smile that she had started to show more often recently. “Then I’ll send you the meeting place and other details on LINE later… Really, thank you.”

The chime rang and Hiiragi turned forward.

The fifth period started with the mathematics teacher, Tanaka (59), walking unsteadily into the classroom.

We stood up, bowed, sat down and class started. I started to think, looking at the back of Hiiragi’s head.

The two of us. Café. Sunday. Meeting place.

Isn’t that what we call a “date”?

Of course I’m sure Hiiragi doesn’t have such an intention. But when looking in from the outside, a highschool boy and girl going out together, you would pretty much always think it’s a date.

Thinking about that, I couldn’t help but fidget my feet. It was totally different from our usual outings, it felt like the hurdle was higher.

And at the same time, I noticed.

I felt a little sense of discomfort in my chest.

Inside my merrily jumping chest, there was a distortion, as if a cold little stone had rolled inside.

What was that? Was that an illusion produced by my loneliness and anxiety too?

□

“What should we talk about when it’s just the two of us?” I asked to Shishamo sitting on my stomach. “Until now we were always four, so I just had to follow the conversation with Sudou and Shuuji, but if it’s just the two of us…”

Eight hours had passed since I was invited by Hiiragi.

The strange uncomfortable feeling in my chest went away, only the excitation and nervousness were still here. Not able to calm myself, I wanted someone to talk to, so here I was, speaking to Shishamo.

I’ve been alone with Hiiragi a few times.

When I understood she was *Tokiko*, when she asked for my help, or on the way back from her house. But each time there was a subject. “14 Years Old”, Hiiragi’s request, Hiiragi Tokoro. And this time, there won’t be such an easy topic. What’s more, it won’t be for just a few minutes, but a whole lot more.

It’ll be the first time I’ll be alone with a girl for so long, so I don’t know what to do to pass time in such a case.

“What about you Shishamo? When dating a male, how do you like it?”

I tried asking, but the fat cat on my stomach only continued to look down at me proudly.

In the first place, what does Hiiragi think about me?

First, there’s no doubt that she has a favorable impression about me. I can’t read the mood, and I’m no good at guessing people’s feelings, but she did say I was popular with her. And I don’t think that Hiiragi… that *Tokiko* would lie like that. I’m pretty sure that her impression of me is positive.

But I don’t know what kind of affection it is.

Is it towards a friend she made in high school?

Or towards someone from the opposite sex?

I'm almost sure it's the former. Until now, there wasn't anything in Hiiragi's behaviour showing that she saw me as someone from the opposite sex.

Also, objectively, I'm not that good looking, can't read the mood, not cheerful, not a sportsman, so I basically have nothing needed to be popular. I really can't see anything in myself that would make a girl fall in love with me. Expecting her to see me as a man even for a moment feels really embarrassing and conceited to me.

And what about me?

Do I want Hiiragi to like me? Do I want to become a couple with her? Do I want to do erotic things with her?

Most likely, everything. I want to be liked as the opposite sex, be in a special relationship, and do things only allowed to lovers.

I interact with Hiiragi, who might only see me as a simple friend, with such impure motives. I felt like I was dishonest towards her.

Besides… Can I, who hurt Ashiya, feel like that? Do I have the right to wish for that?

As I was faintly feeling guilty, I heard a noise from the door being opened in the entranceway on the first floor.

Seems like my mother was talking to the visitor, though I couldn't hear the details through the walls.

Several people footsteps entered the house, went through the hallway, went up the stairs, and just as I was thinking "You're kidding right…" stopped before my door.

"Heeeey, Hosono!"

"'Scuse for intruding~"

Sudou and Shuuji entered without even knocking.

“Wait… T-the heck you’re doing!”

I jumped up from the bed where I was lying down. Shishamo jumped down on the floor looking annoyed.

“Just wanted to talk about something. Woah, Shishamo really became big!”

“Yeah, she’s a splendid adult now.”

“No, don’t just enter someone’s room like that! Knock at least! What would you have done if I was in the middle of something?!”

“Laugh.”

“You’re the worst! No, really, the heck are you doing…”

Sudou and Shuuji sat around the low table as I scolded them, putting chips and some juice they had probably bought before coming on it..

“So, what are you planning…”

“Say,” started Sudou, looking up at me sitting on my bed, “there is something I want to confirm with you, Hosono.”

“… W-what…”

“Are you going out with Tokki?”

“……. Huh?”

Time stopped for an instant when I heard that incomprehensible question.

I thought it was a joke at first, but both their expressions were serious. They were asking for real.

“T-there’s no way we would… Why would you suddenly ask that…”

“Really? Recently the vibe between the two of you changed.”

“R-really…?”

“Yeah, I think so too,” said Shuuji, sitting seiza style on the carpet.

He was making a serious expression, like a young man greeting the parents of the woman he’s going to marry. I’m sure the parents would be delighted if their daughter brought such a man home.

“I don’t really want to intrude, but recently you two stopped talking in public. Yet, you give off the vibe of being in an even more intimate relationship than before, as if you can understand each other, something like that… So yeah, seeing you like that, the only thing to ask is if you started going out.”

“Also, Tokki became cuter.”

Sudou was more relaxed than Shuuji, but still had a serious expression, her back straight while sitting with her legs forming the shape of a “W”.

“Of course she already was a real beauty before, and I was super envious about that, but still, recently she became even more radiant. Did you notice? The guys in your class are looking at Tokki more than before.”

“… E-eh, really?”

I didn’t notice at all. I never paid attention to anyone besides Hiiragi in the class.

“Moreover, remember when you were the only one to rest at Tokki’s house? Shuuji said said that something must have happened.”

“Something?”

“You confessed and got an OK. That or you went straight for a kiss, or even more.”

“… I see.”

That’s a big misunderstanding.

The fact is, far from confessing, I met her sister and totally got in her palm.

But I see… For Sudou and Shuuji, it looked like that. Well, it's true that we just gave a random explanation, so it wouldn't be weird for them to misunderstand.

Shishamo, who was lying on the bed, came back onto my knees. I felt her weight and warmth on my legs through my jeans.

"Err, I'm not lying, I'm seriously not going out with Hiiragi," I answered while petting Shishamo.

"… Really?"

"Yeah. No confession either. Actually, what did you intend to do if that was the case?"

"Well, we would be considerate of course!" said Sudou. Seems like the tension finally wore off as she was back to her usual self. "I know we're rather forceful, but we still thought that you might want time for just the two of you so we should refrain. That's why we needed to know."

"So that's why…"

That's really something these two would think. Yeah, they're pretty forceful, but they know when to draw back. Something I can't do.

Perhaps she didn't like where I petted her, Shishamo started to fight against my hand on top of my knees. I stretched the sleeve of my shirt to protect my hand.

"But," started Shuuji, opening a bag of chips, "you like Hiiragi, right?"

I was less flustered than I thought I would be.

I was only thinking that, as expected, it was obvious to see. If it was these two, of course they would notice. It was still embarrassing nonetheless, though.

“It’s unusual for you to look after someone. You usually don’t care about people, and yet you were looking after Hiiragi-san even before we met her. What’s more is that you know her really well, and you’re always looking at her… With that, no matter how I thought about it, it only meant that you like her.”

“… You’re right,” I honestly confessed. “Yeah, it’s just like you said, Shuuji.”

“That you like Tokki?”

“… Yeah.”

When I nodded, Sudou made a huge smile.

“Fufufufu!” Sudou smirked, looking at me with her arms crossed on the low table.

“At last, Hosono fell in love! That’s good, I’m rooting for you. If you need help, call for me!” exclaimed Sudou.

“Same here. I heard the love stories of many people, so I think I can give good advice,” added Shuuji.

“Nah, you don’t need to… It’s not that big of a──”

I suddenly realised as I was talking.

That’s right, Sudou and Shuuji are here.

I don’t know what to talk about when I’m alone with Hiiragi.

In that case, I just need to ask the two in front of me who have high communication skills, and also know Hiiragi. I’m sure they can give me useful advice.

But…

“… Ah, well…”

I could ask.

… Was that really fine? Can I really ask for their help after all this time?

Until now I’ve been really mean to Sudou and Shuuji.

Ignoring their messages on LINE and their invitations to go out, I did things that could make them hate me many times.

It would be far too selfish of me to ask for their help the moment I’m troubled.

I remember the expression Ashiya had that day.

Because of what I said, she started to cry.

I've been recalling that scene many times for years.

When I made her have such an expression, can I really──

"… Hosono."

Shuuji smiled at me as I was hesitating.

It was a smile that would make any girl in this world fall for him in an instant.

"You look like you're hesitating but… You don't need to be reserved with us, you know."

"Yeah!" exclaimed Sudou, putting the pet bottle she had on her hand on the table loudly.

It surprised Shishamo who stopped attacking my hand, making her look at Sudou.

"Hosono's happiness might be linked to Tokki's happiness, so we want to help as much as possible!"

"… I see," I answered, letting out a smile reflexively.

I knew it. After all, I was next to them until the case with Ashiya.

Still, I'm realising once again.

That these two were really soft hearted, to the point that I would worry about them.

I'll still keep my distance from them from now on too.

It's my policy, and I don't intend to yield.

Still, now, and only now, I'll ignore it and depend on them.

"… Well then, I have a little thing I would some advice on."

□

It has been a while since there was such fine weather.

The asphalt that was dyed black by water until yesterday had completely dried, and the wind was filled with the smell of summer.

I perfectly remembered the advice Sudou and Shuuji gave me. I don't think I'll be able to make use of everything, but I'll do what I can.

I arrived at the park in the residential area just past noon.

Hiiragi chose the park where she asked for my help as our meeting place. It often comes up in "14 Years Old", and it's near Hiiragi's house.

Just like last time, children were playing around under the watch of their parents. I don't know if it was because of the season, or because it was Sunday, but their voices were somehow more cheerful than last time. As for me, I was nervously waiting for Hiiragi.

Then, ten minutes before the arranged time.

"Sorry, did I make you wait…?"

Hiiragi trotted towards me, who was sitting on a bench.

"Nah, I just arrived. I know it sounds like lip service, but I really just arrived."

It was a lie.

In fact, I arrived thirty minutes earlier. Of course, I won't say it.

"I see, thank you…"

Perhaps she guessed something looking at me, Hiiragi let out a smile.

“Well then, I’ll take you on your word. Let’s go.”

I stood up and started walking next to Hiiragi.

I observed her with a sidelong glance.

Today Hiiragi was wearing a blue, greenish dress with a thin cardigan, and sandals with a complex design. Compared to the clothes she wore at her house which bore a simple design with an emphasis on ease of movement, it looked a little stylish.

As for me, Sudou had chosen a white shirt, jeans and sneakers for me to wear. She said “You don’t have decent clothes, so it can’t get better than this, but, yep, at least she shouldn’t think it looks bad,” so it should be fine. Probably.

“About where we’re going today,” not noticing my glance, Hiiragi started to explain in a good mood. “It’s a café made from repairing an old Japanese-style house… It was constructed 80 years ago and a musician couple lived there, but they had to sell it and it was planned to be demolished…”

“80 years, huh, that’s amazing.”

“Right? That’s why some people thought it was a waste to demolish it, so they collaborated to buy it back and renovated the interior.”

I see, it was the kind of place *Tokiko* would love.

It was repeated many times in “14 Years Old” that she likes old things.

“I always wanted to go to this café… But I didn’t really find the time to, so I’m glad you agreed to come with me, Hosono-kun.”

Hiiragi smiled innocently. Like I thought, there wasn’t any hidden meaning in today’s outing.

Still, I wonder why.

The distance between us, as we walked next to each other, was strangely close.

Even when I thought she was too close and took some distance, she would immediately close it to the point that our shoulders would touch. I could feel her body's heat through the thin cloth.

I'm sure I'm overthinking this. Yeah, I'm sure we always have been walking so close to each other. Wait, thinking about it, I almost never walked next to Hiiragi, or rather, next to anyone, so I can't be sure if she's actually too clo──

"Wah!"

Hiiragi suddenly raised her voice.

At the same time, her body pitched forward.

She stumbled.

Everything happened in slow motion, like a scene in a movie. I could see Hiiragi's hair swaying as her body continued to pitch forward.

She's going to fall!

I reflexively extended my hand and caught Hiiragi's. I could feel her whole weight with my arm.

The weight gave a sense of reality compared to *Tokiko* who doesn't have a mass.

I put some force into my arm and pulled Hiiragi up to recover her balance, bringing the world back to its usual speed.

"… S-sorry!" Hiiragi turned towards me, really flustered. "I ended up stumbling… Actually, I just bought these sandals, so… I'm not used to them…"

"Ah, umm, yeah…"

“I was heavy, right? I’m really sorry…”

“No, you weren’t…” I answered while being bewildered by the soft feeling of Hiiragi’s hand that I still hadn’t let go of.

We’re in the midst of summer, and yet her fingers were nice and cool. Her hand clasped mine weakly. Contrary to the hand of a man like me, Hiiragi’s palm was round and soft.

And as I was thinking,

“Let’s go…”

Hiiragi started to walk.

With her left hand still clasping my right hand.

I was confused.

Right now, I am walking hand in hand with Hiiragi.

… Why?

Why Hiiragi didn’t let go of my hand?

Normally, a boy and a girl who are just friends don’t walk hand in hand. Does she have some goal? Or because she doesn’t have much experience with people she thinks it’s normal…?

Wanting even a little hint, I tried to take a glance at Hiiragi’s face walking next to me.

However, she was looking downward and her black hair was hiding her profile, so I couldn’t see.

I couldn’t understand why she would do that.

And yet, joy started to overflow in my chest.

An irritating happiness came through her palm to me.

No matter what she actually thought, the moment we started to walk hand in hand, I felt so happy I could fly. I started to think seriously that I didn't need anything other than that, just like in those cheap love songs.

Still, I wonder why.

On the other side of the endless euphoria, I also felt a certain cold feeling.

The same strange feeling that I had felt in the classroom before.

It felt like something was different, that something had started to diverge from how it should be.

And that feeling was far more pronounced than yesterday.

... Let's stop thinking about that for now.

I shook my head lightly, then looked forward.

Our destination was in the residential area, currently peaceful in this early summer.

The blue sky was spreading like watercolours, with a few clouds here and there. The sun shined down on the buildings and asphalt, making everything look shining and dazzling.

And in my right hand, I felt Hiiragi's.

Right now, I'm alone with Hiiragi. We're walking hand in hand.

I didn't want to have some needless anxiety spoil that.

□

“Wow…”

After a few minutes’ walk from the park, I expressed my admiration the moment we stepped in the café.

Wooden tables and chairs with cute designs were lined up on the wooden floor. On the side of the entrance was an open corridor giving a view of the verdant trees in the garden.

The pillars had countless scratches, and in the corner were old bookshelves and desks, making you remember it was a house before. It seems this café was really popular as almost all the seats were filled by young women. Thankfully, we found some seats at the counter.

After seating on one of the high chairs, I noticed that books were scattered before me. A masterpiece from an author of the Meiji era, a photo album from a famous photographer, compilations of comments about different performers, etc..

“Just as I expected, this café has a pleasant atmosphere…”

After ordering coffees and cakes, Hiiragi started to look at the books in a good mood.

“You can read any book in the café as you please. You should search for a book you like too, Hosono-kun…”

“Yeah.”

To start with, I took the photo album in front of me. The photographer took a photo every day for a year then collected everything. It had some beautiful and interesting photos, but I was too distracted by Hiiragi next to me to concentrate on it.

“… Incidentally,” started Hiiragi just after we received the coffees we ordered, her eyes still on the book in her hand. “Umm… I’m a little curious.”

“About what?”

“Do Sudou-san and Shuuji-kun have someone they’re dating presently…?”

My heart leapt, surprised.

Why would she ask that now? It can’t be that she’s starting to get interested in Shuuji?

“I-I’m not asking with that sort of meaning…” added Hiiragi, perhaps she also thought what she said was too sudden. “It’s just that those two seem very popular, but they’re always with us… So I just wondered if they didn’t have a boyfriend or girlfriend… That’s all.”

“… I-I see.”

Looking at how she was flustered, it was probably the truth. Hiiragi wouldn’t be able to act in that kind of situation.

“These two aren’t dating anyone, and they didn’t in the past too, I think. I distanced myself for a while, but I didn’t hear any rumour about them.”

“Eeeh, that’s unexpected…”

“Apparently they get confessed to a lot, but… well, they’re rather earnest and serious, so they wouldn’t accept on a whim.”

“I see…” Hiiragi added, “Then, u-umm…”

“… Yeah?”

“… Did you ever d-date someone, Hosono-kun?”

She changed the target to me.

“Did you ever like someone? … Ah, perhaps you even have a girlfriend… In that case, I’m sorry for calling you. Even if you don’t have a girlfriend, if you have someone you like… I’m sorry…”

Hiiragi got a little disordered. She was still her usual bad speaker.

Still…

“Someone I like, huh…”

How should I answer that?

I never dated anyone, nor did I ever like someone seriously.

That is to say, until a few weeks ago, when I realised I liked Hiiragi.

I’m sure she just asked out of interest. So she shouldn’t expect a serious answer.

However, if I answer that I have someone I like, she’ll probably enter cheering mode and encourage me. On the other hand, saying I don’t would be a lie. Someone inexperienced like me has no way to know the correct answer.

After seriously thinking for around ten seconds, I answered.

“… Nah, I never fell in love.”

I chose to lie.

“I never dated anyone before, nor I am currently… Or rather, do I look like I am?”

“I think you could get a girlfriend easily, though… Then, you don’t want one? You’re not interested in romance…?”

“… No, I wouldn’t say… that.”

“Then you think it would be nice to have one someday?”

“Well… yeah…”

“I see…”

I was reaching my limit.

If she asks more than that, I'm going to say things I shouldn't.

"What about you, Hiiragi?" I said to prevent her from asking another question. "Did you ever fall in love or date someone?"

"I didn't," declared Hiiragi with an unexpectedly clear tone. "Or rather, you should know that. It's written in '14 Years Old', no? That I never experienced love…"

"Well, yeah…"

It was just like she said, I knew that. There wasn't anything about her being interested in a boy.

However,

"… But, that's until you were 14 years old, no?" I said nervously.

For some reason, Hiiragi looked away, flustered.

"So… What about after that… Or recently──"

"Ah, sorry!" said Hiiragi to interrupt me as she vigorously took out her smartphone from her pocket. "S-someone is calling me! I'm leaving for a moment!"

"O-okay…"

"S-sorry, even though we were talking!"

Hiiragi stood up in a hurry in order to go to the toilet behind me.

However, I saw it. That the display of her phone wasn't showing any incoming call.

"Whoah!"

Perhaps because of the rush, Hiiragi's foot got caught up in a chair.

She lost her balance and fell on my back.

“S-sorry! I stumbled… again…”

“Nah, I’m fine… Take care to not injure yourself…”

“I’m really sorry…”

Her face bright red, she recovered her posture, then went to the toilet in a trot.

On my end, as I saw her go I was greatly flustered by the sensation I felt on my back.

When she fell on my back, I felt two round things around my shoulders…

That was… yeah, I’m sure that was Hiiragi’s breasts.

In manga and novels they always talk about how soft they are, but what I felt first was the hardness of the bra. Then after that, I surprisingly felt the soft swellings hidden behind the thick cloth.

If I had to describe her, then Hiiragi was the slender type. Her upper arms and legs were like those of a model, Sudou even said she was really envious about her body.

Still, apparently she had bigger breasts that her slender body makes you think.

“… What the heck am I thinking…”

Right now I’m in a charming old-fashioned café. No matter how happy I am that the girl I like pressed her chest on me, it’s not the kind of place I should think about that.

To calm myself I drank all the coffee in my cup in one go.

When looking towards the toilet, I could see Hiiragi trying her best to look like she was bothered by a call while acting like she was talking to

someone.

□

We read books, took a break and talked a little, then read books again. Three hours later, we exited the café.

“Umm, thank you for today… It was fun…” said Hiiragi at the station when we were at the point of separating, making me uneasy.

Did I do fine? Thanks to Sudou and Shuuji’s advice I could keep the conversation going on, but… I hope I didn’t bore her.

“Err… Sorry, in the end I just went along with you…”

“Eh!? T-that’s not true!” exclaimed Hiiragi, shaking her head. “Rather it’s me who should apologise… I always make you listen to my selfishness… But… if you’re fine with it…” Hiiragi peered at my face uneasily, “Would you go out with me again…?”

My heart throbbed strongly.

I know it’s not that “that kind” of going out, that there is no way she had such intentions. Still, for me who is in love with Hiiragi, that sentence shook me greatly.

And once again, I felt a pronounced discomfort in my chest.

I clearly felt that something was starting to diverge from how it should be.

Even though the one before me was Hiiragi, I felt like I was talking to someone I didn’t know, as if a strange being was in front of me. I felt an incomprehensible loneliness.

“Also, umm… err…” Hiiragi looked down, apparently hesitating to say what she wanted, but she continued. “If possible, I have something important I would like to talk about tomorrow…”

“… Something important?”

“Yes. So if you have time, I would be glad if we could talk after school…”

“… I see, got it. I’ll make time after school.”

“Thank you…” said Hiiragi, smiling with her face bright red. “Well then, see you tomorrow.”

Hiiragi waved her hand and went away. As I was seeing her away, the discomfort in my chest became clear enough to the point I couldn’t ignore it anymore.

□

I wonder what it is…

That evening, I was worrying endlessly on my bed.

The discomfort I had towards Hiiragi started a few days ago, and was growing each day.

If I had to give an example, it was as if you walked, then suddenly you found yourself in an unfamiliar place and started to feel uneasy and lonely. It was the first time I ever felt like that about someone.

Maybe it’s just because I’m liking her unrequitedly.

Maybe I’m anxious about doing something bad and being hated for it?

I think there is that too. I'm careful about everything I do when I'm with her. After we separated, I kept regretting not doing this or that better.

But what I felt wasn't uneasiness with a hint of happiness in it, the discomfort in my chest was filled with pure anxiety.

The question then is, what about Hiiragi makes me feel anxious? I don't have any idea what it could be.

As I was thinking, I heard people talking downstairs. Seems like someone came.

Then, just like it happened before, footsteps came upstairs until before my door.

"Yo, Hosono."

"Knock the damn door…"

The one who opened the door was the plain clothed Sudou.

"Hey, it's fine, we're friends."

"No matter how good a friend you are, you should knock… Anyway, why did you come so late?"

Looking at the clock on the wall, it was already past 9pm. It was kinda late for a highschool girl to come in the house of an acquaintance.

"Well… There is something I want to talk about, or rather to check…"

Sudou entered my room, then closed the door. At first I thought she wanted to hear about today's date, but I noticed that her expression was unusually serious, so I prepared myself.

"Something you want to check?"

"Yeah… Actually, I'm still a little confused…"

Sudou sat down on a side of the low table and started searching for something in her bag.

Then, after finding it, she took it out and presented it to me.

“You know about that… right?”

I was at a loss for words.

“I learnt about it today, but…”

The reason was simple.

It was because the thing in Sudou’s hand was──.

“You know that novel, no?”

The cover was an illustration of a middle school girl.

The title was written with a simple design.

During the past year I had read it again and again, the novel that directly changed my life.

It was “14 Years Old”.

──*The world only made one promise to us. I’m looking forward a little to the day it’ll be fulfilled.*

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 5 – Discourse on Decadence

“I heard from someone in my class… Someone who was in the same middle school as Tokki,” said Sudou, as if she was the witness of a crime while looking at “14 Years Old”. “She told me that Tokki’s sister pen name was Hiiragi Tokoro. So I wondered what kind of books she wrote, and found out ‘14 Years Old’ released recently… Then I remembered. That I often saw you read this book, Hosono…”

“Well, yeah…”

“Anyway, I had a strange hunch, so I decided to buy it and read it. It was pretty difficult, but sometimes I would feel the same way as the protagonist, so it was interesting. So… I want to ask,” Sudou’s eyes changed from those of a witness, to those of a detective, “*Tokiko* is… Tokki, right?”

I reflexively looked away from Sudou.

“… You noticed too, right, Hosono? There’s no way you didn’t. And… I’m still a little confused, but the reason you got closer to Tokki, it’s because of ‘14 Years Old’…?”

… Well, of course she would notice.

Even if she isn’t much of a reader, of course Sudou would notice that *Tokiko* is Hiiragi. In that case, it was natural to think that “14 Years Old” had some influence on my relationship with Hiiragi.

… It’s getting bad.

Hiiragi wants to hide the fact she’s *Tokiko*.

That's why I never talked about it to anyone, and in fact, *Tokiko* = Hiiragi Tokiko was a secret that nobody in school other than me and Hiiragi knew.

And yet, someone finally noticed.

"Well, I know I should be asking Tokki directly, but… But I fear I would hurt her by asking something I shouldn't. She's a sensitive girl after all, and perhaps there are some circumstances about that book… That's why I thought I should ask you first…"

It's most likely the right decision.

I remember that day when I realised Hiiragi was *Tokiko*. When I asked her, she was excessively flustered. I'm sure that for her, being the model of *Tokiko* is quite a delicate subject. In my case, perhaps because I was a fan of "14 Years Old", she didn't really mind it much after that, but in the case of someone who usually doesn't read books like Sudou, it's possible that their relationship will change.

Hiiragi and Sudou finally became friends. Now wasn't the time to cause some problem.

Still… What should I do?

How can I get over this problem?

I thought about lying, but it would be difficult to give a coherent explanation on the spot. In the first place, even if I said a good lie, it was possible that Sudou would notice something when talking to Hiiragi.

I could also refuse to answer, but it might leave a bad aftertaste to Sudou.

… In that case, I should ask her to keep it secret and reveal the truth.

I should say everything that happened until now and ask her to not talk about it to Hiiragi. It should be the best way to avoid problems for the time being. It's a little awkward to talk without her permission… But I'm sure she will understand if I explain the situation to her.

“… Well, a lot happened.”

When I said that, Sudou knitted her well shaped eyebrows.

“What kind of things…?”

“Well, it’s going to take some time… It all started when I found that book in a library in middle school, then I really came to like it…”

I explained everything to Sudou. That I’ve been adoring “14 Years Old” since middle school. That the heroine, *Tokiko* suddenly appeared in front of me when entering high school. That she asked for my help. And finally, that I fell in love with her.

“So in short…” I concluded, as Sudou was listening to me seriously. “Just like you said, Hiiragi is *Tokiko*. So in a way, right now we’re seeing the after of *Tokiko*’s epilogue.”

”… I see, so that’s the truth.”

As she said that, Sudou hung her head, thinking about something.

“Tokki is *Tokiko*’s model, huh… Of course they would look alike…”

I was a little surprised by her reaction.

I thought that she would me more like “Awesome!” or “I want her sign!”. I wonder why? Why is Sudou making such a serious expression?

“… Err, then Hosono, you like *Tokiko*, and because of that you took interest in Tokki and got closer to her, something like that?”

“Well, yeah, I guess. Because I like *Tokiko*, I got interested in Hiiragi.”

“And thanks to that book, you know how she thinks and what she likes, so you can easily help her…”

“That’s it.”

“I see…” Sudou hung her head once more. “I see, I see…”

Then after breathing deeply, and spitting it out,

“But, err… Isn’t that, like, kinda dangerous…”

“… Dangerous?”

“… Ah, no, that’s not what I meant! It might just be my imagination but…” Sudou raised her face and waved her hand before it. “Err, just in case, I want to ask… The one you like, Hosono, it’s Tokki, not *Tokiko* in ‘14 Years Old’, right?”

“… Huh?”

“It’s just getting pretty confusing… so I wanted to ask to be sure.”

“… No no, there’s nothing to be confused about, they’re the same person. ‘14 Years Old’ is about Hiiragi. You read the book, no? Then you should understand, that what’s written inside is totally Hiiragi.”

“Well, you’re right, but…” Sudou looked above a little, searching her words. “True, I think that Tokki’s feelings are really well expressed. The author, Hiiragi Tokoro, is really incredible.”

“Right?”

“In fact she must have asked many questions to Tokki, then she copied her just like that in the book. Still,” Sudou looked at me, concerned, “*Tokiko* will always be *14 Years Old*, but Tokki won’t. She’s growing and changing.”

She’s growing and changing.

When I heard these words, I was startled for some reason.

The feeling swirling in my chest, the one I couldn’t understand, was making surface.

“In fact, this book was released last year, and was likely written the year before. So it’s already been two years. Besides, many things happened since Tokki entered high school. She won’t stay the same as *Tokiko* forever.”

The throbbing in my chest accelerated.

It felt like I was forced to take notice of something I’ve been ignoring unconsciously.

“So yeah, you got closer because of ‘14 Years Old’. I don’t think that it’s bad in itself. But… Hiiragi Tokiko is a real person, not the heroine of a story… So I think you should like her as a person, Hosono.”

Talking until here, Sudou made a smile trying to smooth things over.

“Ah, of course you can ignore what I said if you think I’m too meddlesome! Perhaps I’m thinking too much, and if you two are happy with such relationship, then it’s fine, err…”

However, I couldn’t find any word to answer to Sudou.

Could it be.

Could it be that the uncomfortable feeling I had was because of that?

I didn’t want to admit it. But if I do, it explains everything. It’s the only explanation.

Hiiragi changed.

If she was the same as when she was *Tokiko*’s model, she wouldn’t have been able to get along with Sudou and Shuuji. There’s no way she would go to karaoke, or invite everyone to her house.

Not only that.

She shouldn’t be someone who would go out with a boy who isn’t her boyfriend during her holiday, as well as walk hand in hand and ask to go out again together.

And thinking about it, the times when I felt uncomfortable was when Hiiragi didn't act like *Tokiko*.

The feeling that was lurking in my chest was starting to take form.

Confusion was gradually taking hold of me.

Hiiragi was stopping being *Tokiko*.

The person depicted in "14 Years Old" was disappearing.

That time when Hiiragi asked for my help, I thought that if it was me I could do it. Even though I was avoiding people and trying to live my life alone peacefully, I thought I wanted to help her.

That was because she was *Tokiko*.

It was because she was *Tokiko*, the one I admired and empathised with for a year, that I decided to be by her side.

Then, if she stops being *Tokiko*, can I still stay by her side?

And can I say with certainty that I like her?

"… Hosono?" Sudou looked at my face. "Y-you okay…? You look pale…"

"… Y-yeah, don't worry, I'm fine," I shook my head once, and smiled at Sudou. "I was just thinking a little. Anyway, it should be fine. I think I truly like her, and shouldn't stop to just because she changed."

"T-then I guess it's fine…"

Sudou was showing a clearly worried expression. It seems she didn't expect me to react like that.

"Sorry for coming in the middle of the night… I just couldn't put it out my mind."

"Don't worry, everything is okay…"

“If you say so…”

After seeing Sudou off, I went back to my bedroom.

I still had a hard time putting the things she said in order in my head.

Hiiragi is changing.

One she won’t be Tokiko *anyome.*

Was the uncomfortable feeling I felt really coming from that?

And if that’s the case, what will happen to my relationship with Hiiragi?

Thinking so far, I remembered.

I took out my phone and looked up my schedule.

Hiiragi said she wanted to talk with me after school tomorrow.

I don’t know what she want to talk about. Perhaps she just wants to chat, or perhaps she wants to reveal something to me.

Either way, I’m sure I’ll be able to clear things up.

What is this uncomfortable feeling, as well as what our relationship will become, I’ll understand everything then.

It was more than a simple hunch, I was convinced of that.

I picked up my school bad, then took out “14 Years Old” from it.

Even though it was the book that always made me feel stronger when taking it, right now it looked just like terribly unreliable toy weapon for some reason.

□

“I’m really sorry, calling everyday…”

The next day, after returning home once we reunited at the park. Hiiragi was waiting on a bench a an apologetic smile.

“But it shouldn’t take long today, so… Please listen to me a little.”

“… Sure, I don’t mind.”

I felt relieved while looking at her expression.

I had some apprehension because of what Sudou told me. I feared that I would see Hiiragi as a totally different person from before when coming to school.

But thankfully, Hiiragi was still the Hiiragi I knew. She was still a mild-mannered literature girl just like *Tokiko*, so I guess we worried too much.

The clock in the park pointed a little after 5pm.

At that time, there were mainly primary school kids in the park. Some were playing football, some were playing tag, and some were playing on their own in a corner. Their cheers faded in the evening sky. Perhaps someone was making curry in a house nearby, as we could smell it from the bench we were sitting on.

“… So, about what I want to talk about,” started Hiiragi. “I want to express my gratitude…”

“Your gratitude?” I said reflexively hearing these unexpected words.

“Yes. You remember how I said I would do anything I can as thanks for your help? Still, until now I didn’t do anything, so I thought it was time to do something…”

“… Ah, yeah, you said that.”

Thinking about it, she did say that.

Back then I was just happy to be relied on by *Tokiko* and to be able to keep being with her that I just forgot about it.

“Thanks to you, Hosono-kun, I became friend with Sudou-san and Shuuji-kun… Also, I think I’ll be fine from now on too. That’s why, I want to properly thank you…”

“Don’t bother. I didn’t help with that in mind, and, well, it was fun for me too.”

“But that won’t do, I won’t be satisfied with that. You always did your best to help me, so not doing anything in return pain me. So please, let me make something for you.”

“… I see.”

She said that much, so I guess I should accept.

Even in “14 Years Old” *Tokiko* had a strong sense of duty, I don’t want to deny how she feels.

“Then, I’ll take you on your words…”

However, looking at her carefree expression, I suddenly thought about something.

Perhaps that will put an end to our current relationship.

Hiiragi made friends. Thanks to that, little by little she’ll broaden her relationships.

If so, then maybe she doesn’t need my help anymore.

“… Is there a problem?”

Hiiragi looked at me uneasily.

“You look somehow… sad.”

“… Aaah, no, don’t worry, it’s nothing!” I exclaimed while shaking my head hurriedly, then I smiled.

It’s true that I felt a little lonely about ending the comfortable relationship we had for the last two months.

But… Hiiragi finally got what she wanted. It’s because I wanted to see her smile that I helped her.

In that case, I want to congratulate with her.

“By the way, what can you do as thanks?”

“If it’s something I can do, then whatever. Even if it’s something a little difficult, I’ll do my best. But if I had do give some examples, then, hmm…”

Hiiragi looked at the sky who started to turn red.

“… I can treat you to something delicious, or give you something appearing in ‘14 Years Old’. Like the mushroom alarm clock I use every morning…”

“I’ll feel guilty if take your daily necessities,” I said, reflexively laughing.

The mushroom alarm clock did appear a few times in “14 Years Old”, so I’m a little interested, but yeah, I can’t take it from Hiiragi, that’s would be too pitiful.

“Then, my sister’s autograph? I think that if I ask she’ll sign as many time as you want. Alos, hmm… If you’re interested, I can ask for you to have a meal with the editor, Nonomura-san…”

These two things were certainly really interesting. They were things only Hiiragi could do that would make me happy. Having a meal with Nonomura-san would make me really nervous, but I would get to hear some inside stories about “14 Years Old”.

“Other than that, umm… I could lend you any book you like in my sister’s room. If there is you want, I could give it to you as a present, like──” Hiiragi paused an instant and turned back her gaze towards me. “A girlfriend, for example, is fine too…”

“…. Huh?” I raised my voice stupidly, confused. “A… girlfriend?”

“Yes… Hmm, didn’t you say so yesterday? That it would be nice if you got a girlfriend…”

For some reason Hiiragi looked away and started to explain flustered.

“So, if there is something I can do, I’ll help you to get a girlfriend…”

I could hear the slight sound of a door opening in my heart.

The heavy door in the depth of my heart, the one I tried my best to keep shut, so that what’s inside would not get out.

And because of Hiiragi’s words, the uncomfortable feeling I had recently started to leak out from here gradually.

I’ll help you to get a girlfriend.

These words showed the intention to be more proactive in her relationship with others.

“… Help me? How?”

As I asked that, Hiiragi became even more flustered.

“E-err, umm… I didn’t really think that far… But for example, I could hear what kind of girl you like and… introduce you to one?”

Each time Hiiragi spoke, the door gradually opened.

The uncomfortable feeling started to erode my chest.

Hear the kind of girl I like.

Introduce a girl to me.

I felt the voices of the kids in the park fading far away.

Then I finally noticed.

That Hiiragi wasn't wearing her uniform, but a dress I never saw before.

She took the time to change? Just to meet a classmate?

Why didn't I notice sooner?

"… U-umm, if you already have a girl you're interested in, I'll support you to get closer to her! Compared to the me from before, the me right now should be able to do something…"

The little hope I had to maintain our current relationship was getting painted out by that uncomfortable feeling.

My relationship with Hiiragi was changing into something that couldn't be undone.

Then Hiiragi, Hiiragi Tokiko who was in front of me, said those fatal words.

"And, if you're not against it…" started Hiiragi, looking downward.

Then, at the same time the chime signaling that it was 5:30pm rung, she looked at me and said:

"… I could become your girlfriend."

Her face was flushed as if she had caught a cold.

Her eyes were so moist that tears were on the verge of falling.

Her reserved, jet black irises were looking at me.

Her lips were tightly closed, and she was pressing her palm strongly against her chest.

Her slender shoulders wrapped inside her dress were trembling a little.

And as for me who looked at her,

The door inside my heart opened completely.

A black mist gushed out of it like surging waves.

My uneasiness and the uncomfortable feeling I had became clear, and a question formed itself in my mind.

Who is this?

Who is the girl in front of me?

She said she would become my girlfriend if I wasn't against it.

The *Tokiko* I know would never consider the relationship between lovers as something to give.

That's why, it clearly made me realise.

What Sudou said was right.

Hiiragi is changing. She won't stay the same as in "14 Years Old" forever.

The one before me was *Tokiko* before.

But now, she stopped being her.

Wanting to get friends after entering high school, going to karaoke with classmates she just met, inviting them to her home to study, holding hands with a male friend.

And finally, proposing to that male friend to become his girlfriend as thanks was the 15 years old girl before me.

Anxiety and fear that felt almost nostalgic took possession of my body.

I don't understand the feelings of this girl.

I don't understand what she was thinking and feeling.

What should I answer? What should I do?

Will I hurt this girl with my words like I did back then?

The fact that *Tokiko* disappeared in front of me, and that I was part of the reason she did, made looking at the girl who changed in front of me unbearably painful.

And more than that was myself.

I saw the girl in front of me as the heroine I liked, willfully held expectations, and the moment I realised it was impossible I lost my calm.

Such a me was nauseating and I couldn't forgive myself.

"… I-is there a problem?"

I could see Hiiragi looking at me from the corner of my view.

"You're looking pale and sweating a lot…"

"… Sorry," I somehow managed to speak. "I can't be by your side anymore, Hiiragi."

"Huh?"

Hiiragi opened her eyes wide, surprised by my words.

Without making a single movement, she continued to look at me with an unreadable expression.

Then finally, she opened her mouth slightly and asked in a faint voice:

"Why?"

"… Sorry, everything is my fault."

I revealed everything to Hiiragi.

My selfish expectations, the disappointment that came from it, as well as my anxiety.

“… I just can’t understand your feelings anymore…”

Not even blinking once, Hiiragi was just looking at me, dumbfounded.

“Before it was fine. Thanks to ‘14 Years Old’ I could understand them… It’s unfair, but I managed thanks to that… But now, the Hiiragi right now is different from before… You became more cheerful and smile more..”

Hiiragi didn’t make a single movement.

“And that’s great. Yeah, really great. Still… Sorry… I just can’t understand the new Hiiragi… Because I can’t understand you, I’m scared of hurting you… And I hate myself for thinking like that…”

Finally, I said to the unmoving Hiiragi:

“Let’s put an end to everything.”

Looking around, the primary school kids weren’t in the park anymore. They most likely went back home to eat dinner.

Left were only me, trying to end everything because of selfish reason, and Hiiragi Tokiko, the victim. Right now, I was horribly hurting the girl in front of me, even though she was supposed to be so important to me.

Humid wind blew through the park, making Hiiragi’s hair sway.

She slowly looked down, hanging her head.

Her bangs hid her face, making me unable to read her expression.

Then,

“No,” she started feebly, “I don’t want that.”

Her mouth was only slightly open, so her voice was very faint.

Or perhaps it was only an auditory hallucination made by my desire, and she didn’t say anything.

After a silence that felt like hours,

“… I see,” she said, then looked at me

She was smiling awkwardly.

“I see, I made you feel like that… I’m sorry, taking advantage of your kindness, I said something really selfish…”

Her tone was the same as always, as if we were just talking normally.

But the current me couldn’t tell if it was bravado or how she truly felt.

“You know, you said that you were unfair, but… It’s the same for me. I’m bad with people too, so I thought that if it was you, Hosono-kun, we could be friends… I thought you would understand my feelings, so I relied on you.”

Hiiragi let out a little laugh.

“That’s why, maybe we’re the same…”

The wind blew once again between us.

The current me could neither reply, nor look at her in the eyes.

Hiiragi got up from the bench.

She swept the skirt part of her dress with he palms, then turned towards me who was still sitting down.

“… Thank you for everything,” Hiiragi said while bowing. “I was really glad when you helped me and when we went out together.”

Saying her piece, Hiiragi turned around, and,

“Goodbye.”

She quietly muttered, then quickly went out of the park.

She turned at the street corner, and her figure disappeared.

That's it.

Everything ended.

I felt a sense of loss, as if a part of me disappeared.

With this, I went back to the epilogue.

Back to not getting closer to anyone in high school, just like middle school.

Back to the boring high schooler who wants to keep the conversations and the committee work to the minimum, not join any clubs, and keep his human relations as small as possible.

My body grew weak.

There wasn't any ounce of energy left in me to stand up.

Looking up, in the blend of indigo and orange that made the sky, a white airplane was flying north.

──*There isn't any guarantee. No happiness, no misfortune, no justice, no injustice, no mixed breed dog, no bed hair, no tedious talk, no conceit. Still, we continue to think "One day, yes, one day" as we live. In this cruel world.*

(14 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Chapter 6 – Being With You in This Irritating Place

Heat haze was swaying above the polyurethane floor tiles.

July. The air was so hot and humid on the roof during midday that it felt viscous.

The blazing sun was so violent that even as I was sitting in the shade under the water tower the wind carried the heat to me, so I had to wipe the sweat forming on my brow.

There wasn't anyone other student around. Even if until recently this place was so popular that everyone was fighting for it during lunch break, now that the summer really started, nobody wanted to come anymore.

As I opened the bag of the pan I bought earlier, I looked at the club building.

Inside the dim music room, art room, calligraphy room were a few club members either practicing or eating their lunch.

As I was thinking they were people from a different world than me,

"… Hmm?"

I felt my phone vibrating in my pocket.

I took it out and checked the display.

However, there wasn't any notification.

I guess I imagined it.

A week passed since I stopped receiving messages from Sudou and Shuuji.

Since that day with Hiiragi, I severed all contacts with not only Hiiragi, but Sudou and Shuuji too.

At school, I didn't speak to Hiiragi who was in front of me, and if Sudou and Shuuji come to the classroom, I leave until they do the same.

When they manage to take hold of me, I say a few vague things then quickly leave. During lunch break, I go to places no other people come, like now.

At first they sent me many messages each day.

──Sorry, it's my fault for saying things I shouldn't have… I want to talk, so please answer…

──Could you tell me what happened? I think it'd be a shame for things to continue like that.

──It's fine if you're angry at me, but can't you at least continue to get along with Tokki…?

──Sudou and Hiiragi feel really down. Can't you come back?

Based on these messages, the three of them are still together. perhaps they even eat together at lunch. On the other hand, looks like Hiiragi didn't tell them the details about what happened.

Also, apparently Sudou was feeling responsible for what happened. Sudou being Sudou, she must have realised that what she said was the trigger to this situation. Though actually, there isn't a single thing she should feel responsible about.

As for me, I totally ignored their messages.

I didn’t have anything to say to them, nor did I want to say something.

Like that, I received messages less frequently, and by last week I received nothing.

“Come back, huh…” I unintentionally let out those words as I remembered Shuuji’s message while eating my sweetened bun.

I almost couldn’t feel the taste because of how gooey the cream became with the heat.

How could I even come back?

How could I speak with Hiiragi again after hurting her like that?

In the end, everything went back to how it should be.

Living quietly without being involved with anyone. What i hoped when I entered high school. After going through something really painful, I finally realised what was my place.

I stuck the straw in the carton of my juice while sighing.

However, I didn’t manage to break through the elastic part, and the straw broke in the middle.

□

“Hey, been quite a while.”

On the way back from school.

As I was reading a book in the bookstore I stopped by on a whim, I heard a voice I knew from my back.

Surprised, I turned around. A tall woman with a body brimming with woman sensuality wearing a black dress and light brown sandals, that is to say Hiiragi Tokoro, was standing there.

"… H-hello."

I stepped back and reflexively looked down.

Currently, "14 Years Old" was the symbol of a painful memory. So running into its author was quite awkward.

And yet,

"Nice coïncidence there, I've been wanting to meet you for a while," Hiiragi Tokoro said with really delightful smile while looking at me. "I mean, you didn't tell me your address or a way to contact you. Only that you loved books. So each time I came to this bookstore I've been fidgeting at the idea that you could be here."

I wonder why? Her tone already totally passed the point of being in a good mood, she sounded like she was in really high spirits.

"… You seem to be enjoying yourself, though."

"Of course, you noticed. Indeed, after all, I like this store. I feel happy just by being here, you could even say I *love* this store."

Hiiragi Tokoro spun around as if dancing, making the skirt part of her dress wave.

"Just look around. From old masterpieces to new works, even recent hits are on these bookshelves You can only feel love towards the books from this selection."

"… If you say so."

“What’s more, this store…” started Hiiragi Tokoro, then approached me, her mouth near my ear, and whispered. “They put my books on the side of the cash register to make them more noticeable to the clients…”

“… Haa,” I sighed reflexively.

With the current situation, talking to someone in high spirits like that was kinda tough. Well, we don’t have anything to talk about, so I should just leave quickly.

“Well, I’ll be going then…” I said, trying to pass next to her.

But,

“Fufufu, wait a second.”

Hiiragi Tokoro blocked the passage

“Didn’t I just say I’ve been wanting to meet you for a while?”

“… Do you need me for something?”

“Of course, more than anyone. Do you have a little time after this?”

“… I do, though unwilling.”

“How cold… But you know, I have something important I want to talk about.”

“An important talk?”

“Indeed. Something related to my work. So I hope you can give me an hour of your time.”

If she says that, of course it’d me difficult for me to refuse.

I’m still reluctant, but perhaps I should at least listen to what she has to say.

“Well, if it’s just an hour…”

The moment I reluctantly agreed, Hiiragi Tokoro raised the corners of her mouth, making a crescent moon shape.

“That’s the spirit.”

She started to walk towards the exit of the store.

“Come. I’ll treat you for tonight’s dinner.”

□

We were now in a cosy Italian restaurant in the residential area.

There weren’t even ten seats, and the interior was illuminated with warm colours. Aside from us there were three other clients.

Apparently Hiiragi Tokoro was a regular here. After lightly greeting the shopkeeper, she gave me the menu.

“What do you want to drink? I don’t mind even if you want a beer or wine.”

“… Err, I’m minor, you know.”

“I know, it was a joke. Here is the menu for soft drinks. You can also have cold water.”

“Then cold water…”

Hiiragi Tokoro ordered wine and a few things to eat.

“Well then, cheers to our reunion.”

“… Cheers.”

I knocked my glass half heartedly, and picked a cracker amongst the appetisers brought to us.

It had liver pâté (or some kinda paste) on it, and the taste was something I never tasted before.

“And so, without delay,” started off Hiiragi Tokoro with a red face just about when the dishes were brought to us. It seems she was already a little drunk.

“Today I want to confirm something, and talk about something with you.”

“… About what?”

“First, the thing I want to confirm,” she said, looking at the wine in her glass. “I heard from Tokiko that you’re keeping your distance now.”

… Of course, she would ask about that.

I expected it, but still, just hearing her name pained me.

“… That’s right.”

“It’s such a shame. And here I thought you liked her…”

“… Sorry for not living up to your expectations.”

“Why did you decide to distance yourself?”

“… Hiiragi didn’t say anything?”

I was sure she told her everything. When I met her last time she showed how much she doted on her little sister, so I thought she would meddle in if she saw Hiiragi acting weird.

And actually, just as I thought,

“Of course she did,” Hiiragi Tokoro said as if it was nothing. “But I want to hear it from your own mouth.”

… Why is she so eager to gouge out my feelings like that? I have a hard time understanding what she thinks.

Well, I guess she can't just agree like that as the older sister. Then I have the duty to talk. And she's treating me to dinner, I can't just stay silent as if nothing happened.

"… It was impossible for me to begin with," I said, thinking it was quite a menial thing to say about myself. But it was what I truly thought. "I liked *Tokiko*… the one from '14 Years Old'. That's why I couldn't bear watching Hiiragi change… I really did something bad to her."

"Hmm," Hiiragi Tokoro took an olive, "well, you're right, Tokiko is changing. In a way you could say it was the limit of '14 Years Old'. It could only be about her '14th Year'. What's more," Hiiragi Tokoro threw the olive she picked in her mouth, "what I wrote in the novel was only a part of her. There are many sides of her that I wanted to write about but couldn't for the sake of the story."

"… For example?"

I was a little interested.

When I met her, at least, Hiiragi was just like *Tokiko* in my eyes. If she still had a side of her she was hiding, then as a reader of "14 Years Old", of course it would rise my interest.

"For example, she's quite sloppy."

"S-sloppy…?"

"Indeed. I'm sure she never showed that side of her in front of you, right?"

It was just as she said.

Hiiragi was delicate and well-mannered… She never looked like she was sloppy.

“A while back, you and your friends went at our house, no? Well the day before was quite a disaster. usually her bedroom is just a messy as mine. Even though I had to prepare myself for my meeting, she made me help to tidy up her room.”

“R-really…?”

“Also, I bet you think she’s taciturn, don’t you?”

“… Yes.”

“But the truth is that, when she talks, she *really* talks. That’s why, since she entered high school I heard a lot of things about you. ‘Hosono-kun said that’, or ‘we went there with Hosono-kun’ and such. I couldn’t bear with how charming she was as I listened…”

“I… see…”

From my point of view, she was the type to read a book silently sat on a chair. Not interacting with anyone, and when someone did approach her she wouldn’t show much reaction. I can’t imagine her talking *that* much with her family.

“There are other things. For example, she has childish tastes. She likes cheap ice creams, mayonnaise, bananas and such. Also, she doesn’t read just literature, but quite a lot of manga too. She often comes to my room to borrow some. Speaking of, she often asks some selfish things too. Like pestering me to go buy her something to drink in the middle of the night. Also…” Hiiragi Tokoro grinned widely. “She has quite an interest in lewd things, you know.”

I didn’t know how to react.

Of course it surprised me and I lost my composure, but I can’t show it on my face.

“Fufufu… Surprised, aren’t you? She looks neat and clean, but she’s actually kind of a closet pervert. She leaves just as quickly as she came

when she borrows a manga with *that kind of cover*. … Anyway, back to the subject, I didn't write about these sides of her in '14 Years Old'. And Tokiko herself did her best to hide them. Just to make you see her as *Tokiko* and continue to get along. In fact, she started to wear her jade hair ornament everyday even though she didn't before, and perhaps as a kind of revision she read and reread '14 Years Old' many times too," she said, laughing.

"… She did these kind of things…?"

"Indeed. That's why, don't you think that when she was in front of you she was unnaturally too *Tokiko*-like?"

Listening to that, I started to remember.

As she said, Hiiragi showed me that she was *Tokiko* at every opportunity, going as far at to say similar words.

──Saying she was selfish when asking for my help that day.

──Always using the park in the residential area when meeting up.

──Saying that that knowledge would let her monopolise when I revealed my past.

──Being taken to an old Japanese-styled café during our date.

That's wasn't all. Many times she showed me that she was *Tokiko*, and I didn't doubt her.

"That's why, as long as the two of you used *Tokiko* from '14 Years Old' as an intermediary to get along, it was inevitable that a divergence would appear."

I'm sure Hiiragi was anxious too.

What I wanted wasn't Hiiragi but *Tokiko*. That's why, instead of appearing as herself, she continued to play the role of *Tokiko* in front of me.

Now I finally understand why Sudou said our relationship was dangerous.

“… Just as I thought,” said Hiiragi Tokoro looking at me who was biting my lips. “Of course you would make that kind of face hearing that.”

"… Of course I would."

It's impossible for me to not feels bad after hearing all that.

What kind of face does she think I should make?

"Just as I thought, it's getting complicated. Well, I guess it's understandable… But you know," Hiiragi Tokoro put down her glass and smiled, "I know a way to easily solve your problem."

Her eyes looked straight at mines.

While the shape of her eyes was the same as her little sister, I felt like they had an absolute confidence that the other doesn't have.

Still, I just couldn't believe such a way existed.

My relationship with Hiiragi is warped from the start, only using *Tokiko* as an intermediary, there is no way to solve that "easily".

Still, I thought.

Still, this person is a witch. She's a witch with strange powers who imprisoned the 14 years old Hiiragi Tokiko in a novel.

So, maybe, she really know a way to solve our problem…

"… How?" I asked resolutely.

"It would be easy to explain. After all, it's a very simple solution," said Hiiragi Tokoro, not hiding her dominating smile while putting on airs. "But it would be useless to do it. After all, it's meaningless if you don't find it yourself. That's the kind of way it is."

"… You won't tell me?"

"I won't, do your best to find it."

What a terrible letdown, I can't even sigh.

In the first place it might be wrong to expect something from her. Maybe she invited me to dinner just because she has fun toying with me.

"But I really hope you'll find it, you know. For my sister, and for you yourself… Anyway, that's it for what I wanted to confirm. Now, about what I wanted to talk."

"… What is it?" I answered roughly as I quickly wanted to go home.

But,

"I finished the draft of the manuscript for the sequel."

Sequel.

I reflexively reseated myself hearing that.

In fact, it was always in a corner of my mind. The sequel of "14 Years Old", *Tokiko*'s life after entering high school. How is the manuscript going?

"… Ah, maybe you don't understand what I mean by draft. You see, the '14 Years Old' series uses a little special writing procedure. Normally, you write the general plot and once the editor gives the OK you can write the manuscript. But this series is using Tokiko's life as a model. So first I need to hear the things that happened to Tokiko, then amongst them choose what I'll use. Then from that I make a story matching with Tokiko's mental state. That's what I meant by draft. I show that to the editor and Tokiko, and if they're fine with it I can start writing."

"I, see…"

In short, right now Hiiragi Tokoro has a draft about "everything that happened to *Tokiko* from entering high school to recently".

I wonder what kind of thing it became.

Last time she said I would appear in the sequel. Then considering the actual situation, I wonder what kind of cruel guy I was depicted as.

I get gloomy just imagining it.

“You don’t need to make such face,” laughed off Hiiragi Tokoro seeing me hanging my head. “Don’t worry, I didn’t write you in a bad way. It’s just that like I said last time, I can’t continue without your permission. You’re a key character, so if you’re against it I think i’ll have to rewrite everything. That’s why I want you to read the draft and give your permission before I get to the next step.”

“I, see…”

“So, can you do it? At least, I think it’s worth a read.”

I think it’s a great honour.

To appear in the work of your favourite author, and even have the right to read the draft. It’s the kind of thing a book lover could only dream of.

Still, I just couldn’t get enthusiastic about it.

I understand that Hiiragi Tokoro needs my permission as one of the models of the characters.

But, what would I gain from reading it?

I have severed my ties with Hiiragi. What’s more, because of that I can’t even enjoy “14 Years Old” as much as I did before.

Considering that, I don’t see any reason I should go out of my way to feel bad by reading a story about my failure.

And,

“… Could it be…”

I noticed.

“You’re trying to make me reconcile with Hiiragi by reading that?”

“… Oh,” Hiiragi Tokoro raised her right eyebrow, “what do you mean?”

“… The reason I severed my ties with Hiiragi is because she changed from when she was *Tokiko*. So inversely, if *Tokiko* becomes like her… If she becomes the current Hiiragi, then you think we could go back to our past relationship?”

True, perhaps we could do that.

If *Tokiko* became the current Hiiragi, by reading it, perhaps we could go back to our meeting in April. By knowing *Tokiko*, I can use that knowledge to interact with Hiiragi. Like this, we might be able to get back to our past relationship.

But,

“That’s not a normal relationship.”

If it’s now, I can clearly assert it.

That kind of relationship isn’t healthy.

“If there is a need to have a story just so that we can understand each other feelings, then I’m sure one, or both of us will get hurt on day. So if your objective is to reconcile us with it, then I can’t read it.”

“… I see. Well, I guess you would think that in this situation,” she said, taking a sip of her wine. “But don’t worry, I’m not expecting that. Tokiko too wouldn’t like it either.”

“Well… Yes, you’re right.”

“However,” she started, smiling, “I do hope you’ll understand what it means to have interacted with Tokiko herself by reading it. And, I, myself, want you to read it. I have to say I quite like what I did this time. At least, I think it’s my best work.”

“I see…”

It felt like she was removing my reasons to refuse little by little. If it continue, I’ll really end up reading it.

However, there was another thing on my mind.

“… What about Hiiragi?” I asked nervously. “I’ll once again get to know Hiiragi’s feelings through this novel, right? Her true feelings that she didn’t express. You got Hiiragi’s permission for that?”

“Of course,” Hiiragi Tokoro nodded unexpectedly readily.

Then she continued,

“*‘We met thanks to the story’* she said,” Hiiragi Tokoro said slowly with a loving, yet pitying smile. “*‘We met thanks to the story, so our parting should be done with it too’*.”

These words pierced my heart.

There were clearly words Hiiragi would say. And the *“parting”* amongst them…

I could easily imagine Hiiragi when she spoke these words.

“She says some cute things,” said Hiiragi Tokoro. Her expression wasn’t the bewitching one she had until now, but like that of a mother thinking about her child. “That girl is just so adorable and precious to me. That’s why, as her sister, I’m asking you. This time too I wrote while carefully talking with her. I revised it many times until she herself said that it perfectly showed her feelings as they were. Of course, I don’t think I wrote everything about her, I’m not that conceited. Still, I’m sure it’ll accomplish its role as a parting letter. So please──”

I raised my face and looked at Hiiragi Tokoro.

For the first time, I saw her make a serious and earnest expression.

“Could you read it?”

□

After parting with Hiiragi Tokoro, I went home, took a bath, and when I went back to my bedroom it was already 8pm.

I sat down on the chair in front of my desk while sighing. I looked at my everyday scenery, the phosphorescent clock on the wall, the bookshelves with natural colours, the chest with tons of stickers pasted on it, the pipes in a gutter form at the foot of my bed.

To busy myself, I picked up Shishamo who was rolling the floor and started patting her on my laps. But she wasn’t in the mood apparently, Shishamo groaned then fled from me below the bed.

No homework to do, and tomorrow is saturday, so I don’t need to prepare my bag.

I already read all the books on my bookshelves, and I don’t have any TV programm I want to watch.

No web site I want to check, and of course, no notification from LINE.

So in short, I don’t have anything else to do aside from *that*.

Resigned, I took a deep breath then opened my laptop on my desk and checked my emails. At the top of the inbox was an email with an attached file from an address I didn’t know. I clicked on it to read it.

Hey, good evening. It’s Hiiragi Tokoro. I sent you the file. Enjoy.

I opened the attached document file. There were 40 pages in a two pages spread format. After checking if there was enough paper and ink, I printed it.

After five minutes it finished printing, resulting in a good chunk of paper. I took another deep breath.

“15 Years Old – Draft ver.1”

Was the title of the file written on the first page.

The story of *Tokiko*’s life after turning 15.

The story fundamentally faithfully retrace what happened to Hiiragi, but there was one point completely different. In the story, *Tokiko* isn’t the heroine of a book, instead she lost the diary where she wrote about her everyday, and a certain boy find it and read it.

What will happen after I read that.

The heavy bundle of paper in my hands made me feel a strange uneasiness.

Most likely, if I read it, a big change will happen inside me. I don’t know if it’ll be a positive one or a negative one. Still, if I read it, there will be no turning back, that’s the kind of hunch I had.

However, I shouldn’t run away anymore.

I should read it.

If Hiiragi thinks of “15 Years Old” as a parting letter destined to me, then I want to read it.

I took yet another deep breath, then I turned the first page with the title written on it.

□

This is the story of my everyday life, where still nothing special happens.

Even I believed in the common illusion that something will change when entering high school.

Maybe I'll become a little more adult. Maybe i'll get wiser and understand things better.

However, my expectations were in vain, and I lost my diary on the first day of school.

I write everything that happened to me and what I thought in my diary each day. I didn't write my name, nor other people's names, so it shouldn't be possible to determine that it's mine.

Still, because of that, it was impossible for it to be returned to me. I cursed my stupidity.

My everyday life was just an extension of the life I had in middle school.

I can't talk well with my classmates, and I pass all the break times reading books.

I thought that's was fine. Everyone doesn't need to be cheerful, nor do I want to be like that. It's just that I feel sorry to dampen the mood of my classmates who try their best to talk to me.

I didn't have much of an impression about that boy.

He made a plainer self-introduction than anyone else. His height was average. His hair was a little unkempt, and his looks weren't standing out. Really, that was all there was to him.

"Is your favourite novel 'Wanderings in the Realm of the Seventh Sense' from Ozaki Midori?"

When he asked me that, I became flustered.

And that wasn't all,

"You have an oil painting you received from your grandmother in your bedroom?"

"Every week you listen to the radio broadcast made by some university students?"

"Do you think that you want to live beautifully?"

After hearing that much, I finally understood. He found my diary.

Even after going back home I couldn't stop thinking about him.

To think he would sympathise so much with me, it was the first time someone so zealously expressed their goodwill to me.

However, we probably won't talk again. We both aren't the type to interact with people. As I thought that, I noticed something that surprised even myself.

I didn't want to stop.

I wanted to talk more with him.

As I expected him to, he helped me many times when I was troubled during a conversation with someone.

He's the first person besides my family with whom I talked that much.

However, I felt guilty too.

In truth, I didn't care about not being able to talk with my classmates.

And yet, because I wholeheartedly wished to talk with him, I used his good intentions for myself.

From here now, I thought I should get closer naturally.

I already lied once, but I was reluctant to use even more deception to get closer to him.

However, one morning, a pair of a boy and a girl came to see him and my composure went away.

I was shocked. They assertively talked to him even though he didn't want to, and though they were angry to be ignored and treated coldly, they still continued to talk to him. From what I heard, it seems these two are his childhood friends.

I thought I shouldn't do it.

However, it wouldn't be enough to just wait to get closer to him naturally. Then I have to approach him more assertively too.

On the way back from karaoke, I noticed how much I was exhausted. Acting as someone different than my true self really wore me down mentally.

As I was totteringly walking back home, I remembered about my smartphone.

Earlier LINE was installed on it. Even though I only used my phone to check the new publications, now it became a connection between us.

Then I thought. If I exchange some messages with him, maybe I'll regain a little of myself.

If I had to give a reason for inviting them to my house, it would be jealousy.

They knew each other since they were little, including each other personal things.

But I almost didn't know anything about him. The only thing I knew was that he liked my diary. The asymmetry of our relationship was really painful to me.

I was really glad I got to talk with these two.

I understood they were good people, but I just couldn't feel like I could get closer to them.

In the end, I was just jealous that they were his childhood friends.

I was envious they possessed everything I didn't have, and that they could easily approach him.

But the truth is that they're the same as me. They weren't some carefree popular people. Just like me, they had their own worries about their family, ordinary high schoolers.

As I looked at him talking about his past, my heart beat so fast I thought my chest would burst.

His failure when he was a child. Then the change that happened inside him.

He told me, and only me, about the things that happened to him until now.

The surrounding scenery never looked so colourful to me until now.

Even though he was talking about his painful memories to me.

When he finished talking and I saw his smiling face, I realised.

I want to hold hands with him.

I want to touch him.

I want him to embrace me, I want him to kiss me.

I want him to think of me preciously just as much as I think of him dearly.

──I love him.

I chose a café with a good ambiance near my house for our date.

I went a few times to inspect the café and check the menu. They have books I think he would like, so I'm sure he'll enjoy himself.

I kept secret the fact I already went there. I'll have to act like it's the first time I come.

What's left is to manage to naturally talk about romance during our conversation, just like my sister advised me.

As I read next to him at the counter seats, I wondered what he thought about me.

I don't think he hates me. After all he really praised my diary, and we're both here going out together, so he must at least have some affection for me.

But I don't understand if it's the same kind of affection that I hold for him.

So I wanted to verify. Even if I had to be a little reckless.

Maybe falling in love made me become hopeless.

I became selfish, and I'm only thinking about dirty and sly things.

I can't live beautifully anymore.

It's his fault.

If I didn't met him, I would never have know that feeling.

"I could become your girlfriend."

The instant I resolutely said that, my heart throbbed so strongly I thought it would burst.

I think that anyone hearing that would only hear a confession. If it were these two for example, I'm sure they would even see through all the feelings

hidden behind these words.

However, he's dense so he might not have noticed.

After all, even though I tried my best until now, he never noticed my feelings. I'm sure he isn't really good to notice things.

Either way, by seeing his next reaction I should be able to guess his feelings for me.

Does he only think of me as a friend? Or does he see me as someone from the opposite sex?

And as I was thinking that.

"I can't be with you anymore."

It felt like time stopped.

I couldn't breath. And yet, my heart continued to throb strongly as if it was a lie.

Is this a dream? Or an illusion?

I thought that, but when I tightly grasped my hand, I felt pain from the nails against my palm.

"You changed from the you in the diary."

"That's why, I can't be with you anymore."

I thought it was my punishment.

The punishment towards me who used my diary and his kindness for my sly love.

I deceived him.

To be liked by him, I made myself look sympathetic.

By acting like the Tokiko *in the diary, I took advantage of him.*

It was my just desserts for what I did.

I stood up from the bench and said him goodbye.

The moment I started to walk, tears overflowed from my eyes.

Everything ended.

My first love, this precious relationship, the high school life that I looked forward to for the first time.

I had a hunch.

The evening of the same day, I felt like he waited at the park we usually met.

I changed from my dressing gown to something that could barely count as outside clothes, put my sandales, took a small bag and left the house. I headed towards the park in the street at night.

As you would expect, of course, he wasn't waiting for me at the park.

The park, illuminated by the street lights and the weak moonlight, was empty. I thought it was just like how I felt right now.

By meeting him, I obtained many feelings.

Happiness, joy, anguish, sadness.

And now, by losing him, it felt like everything went away.

I sat down on the bench where he waited for me for our first date.

Then I took out my diary from my bag and put it gently on my side.

Just like you would with a bottle containing a letter where you wrote your feelings when sending it to the sea.

When I looked up, the pale moon was shining in the pitch black sky.

□

My hands were trembling as i finished reading.

What the…

What the hell is this?

I couldn’t understand the unexpected development of the story.

It was a story about *Tokiko* meeting a boy at high school, falling in love with him, then separating from him.

Hiiragi Tokoro's new work, the continuation of *Tokiko*'s story, that is to say "15 Years Old", was a love story.

That alone was already pretty confusing, and yet,

"… That's… me…?"

The boy in the story, the one *Tokiko* fell in love with, no matter how much I thought about it, I could only get to the conclusion it was me.

My brain overheated, and yet it continued to think in circle. I want to admit, I don't want to admit, I want to believe, I don't want to believe. There was a single truth. "15 Years Old" taught me the truth I didn't notice.

Hiiragi liked me?

The moment I thought that, my heart tightened so much I thought it would stop.

It felt like I was going to suffocate, so I took a deep breath.

She tried to change. Everything she did was to get closer to me?

She changed because of me?

… Really?

I wanted to doubt it, but there were no mistaking it.

Hiiragi Tokoro is the one who wrote that. The witch who transcribed a part of Hiiragi in "14 Years Old".

In that case, this “15 Years Old” too is certainly transcribing a part of Hiiragi too.

After an instant, an extraordinary swirl of emotions gushed out from my chest.

Confusion. Bewilderment. Happiness. Anguish. Regret. Self-hatred.

What the hell. Really, what the hell was I doing?

I loved her. She loved me too.

And yet, not being able to be with each other, we separated.

That's it?

Then… What do I do? What *should* I do?

What should I do now that I know the truth?

I didn't know. The problem between Hiiragi and me was still unresolved.

Tokiko isn't Hiiragi. If I forgot that, the same thing will happen again.

Why did Hiiragi Tokoro want me to read that? Did she want me to regret? Did she want to teach me how stupid I am? Or is it something else?

The questions kept multiplying, getting out of order.

I couldn't understand what I thought and what I felt anymore.

And yet, inside the complex swirl of emotions, a certain desire started to rise little by little.

A simple feelings surpassing reason and logic.

I want to see Hiiragi.

I want to see her and talk with her.

I want to hear her voice, I want her to talk to me.

I want to hold her hand, and if possible I want to embrace her tightly.

What I wanted wasn't the *Tokiko* on the other side of the pages, nor the unchanging heroine. What I wanted right now was the changing Hiiragi Tokiko, the one making expressions I never saw before, the one who can be assertive.

I couldn't keep still and reflexively stood up from my chair.

It was 10pm. Hiiragi was probably still awake.

If I run, I should be able to meet her tonight.

But as I started to move, I thought.

No, not yet.

I still couldn't meet Hiiragi.

Before that… There's something I really have to confirm first.

After thinking a little, I took out my phone, opened LINE, selected the person I wanted to talk to and pressed the call button.

"Sorry for calling this late! Where are you right now!?"

□

"W-why did you call us so suddenly…?"

"Yeah, it's pretty unusual… For Hosono to call us like that…"

Ten minutes later.

I dashed from my house to Sudou's, which was in the fourth floor of an apartment building alongside the Zenpukuji River.

Sudou's bedroom was so different from Hiiragi's you wouldn't think they were the both the same high school girls.

There was a light green carpet looking like a lawn, and a string going from a wall to another had photos of Sudou and her friends hanging on it. On her desk cosmetics, writing implements, sweets and medicine against headache were put haphazardly. A kind of chandelier was hanging from the ceiling. Thinking back, she said on LINE a while ago that she bought it on a whim while boasting.

And here I was, confronting Sudou and Shuuji, dripping with sweat.

There was something I really had to ask them.

"Sorry for, calling you, so late at night… But, I have something, I want to ask…"

As I said that out of breath, Sudou reacted awkwardly.

"Nh… No problem, what is it?"

She looked far more nervous than I've ever seen her. It seems she was still feeling responsible about back then. Shuuji was looking more uneasy than puzzled about the situation.

To these two, I said "It's just a what if, but," as preface before continuing.

"What if, by not reading the mood, I ignored someone's feelings and said something hurtful to them… In that case, what would you do?"

"… Eh?"

I guess they didn't understand my intention as they were making faces as if someone poured cold water on them.

"S-something hurtful…? E-err, I would be angry… I guess…"

"… Yeah, though it'd depends on how hurtful…"

“Then, if it’s something really cruel? Something like crushing the other person’s feelings, something you wouldn’t say normally.”

“Hmm, well… If it was said to me I’d get really angry, and if to someone else, I’d give you a really good preaching… I think.”

“Yeah, same here…”

Shuuji agreed to what Sudou said.

Still, I wasn’t satisfied with that.

“That’s it? You won’t… I don’t know, do other things?”

“Other things?”

“Yeah, like, for example…” I thought a little, then said what I thought was appropriate. “… Sever your ties with me, or get more distant.”

However,

“Eeeh, of course I wouldn’t go that far…”

“I don’t think I would either…”

They both denied what I said naturally.

… I see. Well, of course these two would say that.

Even thought I was pretty cold to them, they never went away.

And *that* was the main point I wanted to ask.

“… Why?” I asked them. “Why would you keep being friend with me if I did something like that? In fact I’ve been a real pain to you so far, no? Treating you coldly and all.”

“… Well, can’t deny that,” Shuuji said with a wry smile.

“Then, why won’t you take some distance from me?”

I want to see Hiiragi.

But that would mean that maybe I would hurt her again.

I still don’t understand other people’s feelings. No matter how careful I am, there’s a high chance I’ll hurt Hiiragi again one day.

As long as Hiiragi isn’t *Tokiko*, that she’s someone who I don’t understand the feelings, I’ll keep being anxious about that.

And yet, is it fine for me to want to see her? To want to be with her?

Do I have the right to wish to stand once again by her side?

That’s what I wanted to ask to the two who never gave up on me even though I treated them coldly.

“Hmm…” Sudou crossed her arms, thinking with a serious expression. “I never thought about that…”

“Same here. In the first place,” Shuuji turned towards me and said as if stating the obvious, “that what interacting with people is.”

“… What do you mean?”

“Not only you, but even I, Sudou or anyone can’t understand other people’s feelings. By polishing your communication skills you can get to the point where you can choose words that won’t hurt more easily, but that won’t always be the case. That’s why, in the first place, the premise of interacting with people is that you will hurt each other, or that what I think at least…”

“… Even you two have hurt someone?” I asked, surprised.

“Well, of course even us──”

“I did…”

I was shocked hearing the heavy tone of the voice of Sudou who cut in.

Looking at her, Sudou was hanging her head, tears in her eyes and biting her lips

“Even I… Even I couldn’t understand the feelings of someone, saddening and hurting them…” Tears fell along Sudou’s cheeks. “After all… because… because I of what I said… Hosono and Tokki… Tokki has been feeling down since then, and you wouldn’t come back, Hosono… All that because I poke my nose in your affairs…”

I was bewildered, my mouth wide open.

It was the first time I saw Sudou crying. That I saw her talk like that, full of regrets.

However, I immediately came to my senses.

“W-wait a second!” I bent myself towards the sobbing Sudou. “You don’t have to feel responsible for that… After all, what you said is right… You didn’t say anything wrong…”

“But because of me…”

“I’m just getting what I deserve, you don’t have to feel responsible…”

“… See Hosono,” I turned towards Shuuji who was making a troubled smile, “that’s the thing. Here Sudou is feeling down thinking it’s her fault. And in fact, you took your distance from Hiiragi-san because of what she said, no?”

“Well, yeah…”

“That’s what happen when you associate with people. You hurt them and they hurt you. Be it your own fault, or not, you can’t avoid being influenced by others.”

“… Then why?” I asked them what I never understood. “Why would the two of you… not think that you would rather be alone? Why would you still

want to be with others even though you know you will hurt them…?”

“… Because I like everyone,” said Sudou still sobbing, the contour of her eyes black due to wiping her tears too much. “Even if I know that… I like Shuuji, Tokki and you, Hosono, so I want to be together…”

“… Is there even anything to like about me?”

“… Hey,” Sudou wiped her tears once again, “there was that thing with Ashiya-san, no?”

I felt a sharp pain in my chest hearing these words.

Ashiya. The girl I hurt.

The former classmate who is the reason I gave up on associating with people.

“That time, you told Asshi… Ashiya-san that she was really just like a boy. It’s because of that, right? That you stopped talking to other people…”

… So they noticed.

Because they never said anything I thought they didn’t notice.

“Well yeah, at that time I thought you made a real blunder, you could have said something better and that you were an idiot. In fact, everyone in the class was angry. But… the way you were feeling down back then was really terrible. You looked so terrible that even Ashiya-san herself felt bad about it…”

“… R-really?”

After what happened, I immediately stopped to talk with other people.

So I didn’t know what happened with Ashiya after that.

“Yep… Of course, she was feeling down for a while, but after a month she, and the whole class too, laughed again when she was treated like a boy.

Everyone already forgot about it. And yet, only you build a wall around yourself, and secluded yourself…"

"… You serious?"

"I'm saying the truth. That's why, what happened back then wasn't so terrible you had to sever yourself from people like that… In fact, sometimes Asshi even send me a message on LINE asking if you're doing well."

I couldn't believe it.

I was certain that Ashiya would hate me her whole life.

And I thought I had to live my life while bearing the responsibility for it.

"But you know," Sudou looked straight at me, "I thought that you, who acted like that, was really kind."

Kind.

An adjective not really appropriate to describe me.

And yet, Sudou was saying that to me in all seriousness.

"True, you can't read the mood, Hosono. You say things you shouldn't, hurting and troubling others… But I believe you're kind at your core. That's why I like you and want to keep being friend with you."

"Same here," Shuuji nodded. "Look, around our age most people start getting more skilled at reading the mood, guessing other people's feelings, using appropriate words and such. But that's not always for other people they do that. They do it to make themselves look better and be popular. In fact we do it too."

"Eh… you're like that too?"

"Yeah. But contrary to acting kind, I think that you yourself are kind, Hosono. So as long as you don't lose your kindness, I won't mind being hurt by you."

“… I see.”

I finally felt like I understood Sudou and Shuuji’s feelings.

People hurt each other. There isn’t any relationship without pain.

And yet, people want to be together. As long as they like each other, I’m sure anybody can be together.

So, what I need is──

What I need to be with Hiiragi is──

“… Fufufu.”

Sudou smiled looking at my face.

Then she said,

“Did you get the resolve to hurt and be hurt?”

“… Yeah,” I nodded and stood up. “Thanks to you two.”

“Nah, we didn’t do anything special.”

“Yeah, no need to say thanks. After all,” Shuuji made a gentle smile, “we’re friends, no?”

Then feeling empathy from the bottom of my heart with these two for the first time, I nodded.

“Yeah, you’re right.”

□

The clock in the park was pointing 10:32pm.

Out of breath, I sat down on a bench.

The park was illuminated by the weak street lights. The playground, trees and the sandbox submerged in darkness looked totally different from how they are during the day, it kinda made me think of an aquarium at night.

I took one last big breath, then took out my phone from my pocket.

I opened LINE, then my conversation with Hiiragi, which hadn't been updated in a while, and after hesitating a little I sent a simple "I'm waiting" to her. Without even waiting for the conversation to show a "Read" I put my phone back into my pocket.

There were countless things I wanted to tell her.

I wanted to apologise. I wanted to thank her. I wanted to tell her my thoughts and complaints about "15 Years Old". I wanted to explain myself, and to tell her my feelings.

All these desires were fighting against each other to be on top, making it impossible to put everything together.

And yet, I thought that was fine.

It's not like I would suddenly become a good talker.

That's why I should just expose all my thoughts and feelings without a single lie to Hiiragi.

That's what I wanted to do.

A few minutes later, I heard someone coming half running.

Then,

“…!”

It was plain to see that Hiiragi, who appeared at the entrance of the park, came here in a hurry considering and rough appearance.

Her bob cut was disordered, she was breathing heavily, the T-shirt she wore as a dressing gown was wrinkled-up. The cardigan on her shoulders had some lint. Her beach sandals were worn out and the strap looked like it would break down any moment now.

I never saw Hiiragi so defenseless before. A living girl was in front of me.

When she saw me seated on the bench she made a mixed expression.

Her flushed face showed bewilderment, anxiety, fear and confusion.

The reason was obviously me. The guilty feeling felt like a body blow in my stomach.

“… Sorry, for calling you so late,” I said standing up. “But there is someone I really want to say to you, Hiiragi…”

“… H-hmm,” she nodded, nervously entering the park.

She came towards me, sometimes looking away, and stopped at a few steps distance.

I was finally confronting Hiiragi Tokiko after a long while.

A black bob cut and a face with looks so well-ordered you could think you saw wrong.

Countless stars were glittering inside her pitch black eyes, which were looking at me now.

Her thin lips were nervously firmly closed down, her white cheeks looked stiff, and her well-shaped eyebrows were frowning uneasily.

The feelings I was suppressing were gushing out from my heart.

My reason was breaking, I wanted to touch her now.

Still, I somehow managed to restrain myself and said:

"… I read '15 Years Old'."

Hiiragi's shoulders trembled.

"… I see."

"As usual… it was the best. Hiiragi Tokoro is really amazing. The way she reconstructed what happened, as well as the way she expressed thoughts and feelings was perfect… With that '14 Years Old''s fans will be satisfied. Also it has a clearer story, so I think it'll sell more."

"… I see."

"I'm also interested in what kind of cover it'll get. I want to read the book version. I'm sure I'll read '15 Years Old' many times too.'

Hiiragi bit her lips not answering.

Looked at her like that, I understood.

Just now, I hurt Hiiragi.

Praising "15 Years Old" meant that I praised *Tokiko* and not Hiiragi, thus hurting her.

Yeah. I'll always hurt people.

I'll always hurt and sadden people with my careless words and my selfish attitude.

And I'll never forgive myself for that.

"And yet," I continued, "I… I thought it was too incomplete."

Hiiragi slowly raised her face.

She made an expression as if everything she was holding in would break out if I continued.

“Seeing *Tokiko* think about many things during her everyday life… well, yeah, I really empathised with her. It was still my favourite novel and my favourite heroine. But…” I took a deep breath and looked at Hiiragi’s eyes. “The one I wanted to meet was Hiiragi, no *Tokiko*.”

Hiiragi’s expression shook with bewilderment.

She didn’t understand what I meant, nor how to take it. That kind of expression.

“… Hey, Hiiragi. You think I’m dense, right?”

Hiiragi seemed hesitant for an instant, but she made a small nod.

“I think you’re right. I didn’t notice you thought that way about me at all. To Sudou and Shuuji it seems it looked obvious, but to me I really didn’t get it. I guess I really can’t understand people’s feelings… But you know,” I couldn’t restrain a small smile as I continued, “you’re the same, Hiiragi.”

“… Why?”

“I mean, you didn’t notice, no? That I was really happy when you asked for my help.”

“Eh…?” Hiiragi opened her eyes wide. “… Really?”

“Yeah. And did you notice that I was reluctant to say goodbye to you when we went back home after the karaoke?”

“… No.”

“What about the time we went to your house and you were so pretty I passed my time looking at you? That while I was happy for you to get along with Sudou and Shuuji I also felt lonely? That I was really happy to talk about my secret to Hiiragi? Did you notice how flustered I was when we bumped into each other?”

Hiiragi's eyes were full of tears on the verge of spilling.

And finally,

"And when it happened, did you notice that I became aware of the fact that I like you, Hiragi?"

My body became hot after declaring that.

My heart was beating at an absurd pace. The sweat on my palms was feeling disgusting.

I don't know if it was because of the excitement or because of nervousness, but my lips were trembling and I couldn't close my mouth properly.

"… No way," Hiiragi looked at me with her hand covering her mouth. "At that time… you were…"

"And it was the same after that too. I always wondered how you thought about me, was nervous when we held hands, thought about lewd things when we bumped into each other, I became useless. You didn't notice at all, right?"

"… B-but, that's… not about me, but about *Tokiko*…"

"I thought that too at first. But after reading '15 Years Old' I realised. I want to know how you'll become, Hiiragi. You might change and not be *Tokiko* anymore, but I want to be with you."

I couldn't keep it anymore.

I took Hiiragi's hands in mine, startling her.

She looked at me, her face bright red.

Looking at her, I──

"I like you," I said, unable to restrain my feelings. "Not *Tokiko*, the one I like is you, Hiiragi, the one in front of me. So let be stay by your side. Let

me see you change.”

A tear fell from Hiiragi’s eyes.

Then as if a dam broke, her eyes overflowed with tears

Something that *Tokiko* would never show, Hiiragi Tokiko’s raw emotions.

Hiiragi took a short breath and wiped her tears with the cuff of her T-shirt.

Then, looking straight at me,

“… Then me too,” she started, smiling. “… I relied on the story again. Moreover I used it to express the things I should have said directly with my own mouth… But with this, it’s time to stop being sly. So please, listen to me.”

Hiiragi straightened herself and cleared her throat.

“… I like you, Hosono-kun,” she said with a clear voice. “I don’t want to just like you, I want you to like me too, Hosono-kun. Not *Tokiko*, but the me before your eyes.”

“… Yeah.”

“So… Please, look more at me. Next to me, and forever.”

I nodded, firmly grasping her hands.

“Yeah, I will.”

I could feel the warmth of her body through her hands.

It wasn’t like the pages of a book, it was Hiiragi Tokiko’s warmth.

I didn’t want to let her go. I wanted to hold her hands forever.

Just when I thought that,

“… Aaaaaah…”

Hiiragi suddenly crouched down, as if her knee grew weak.

“H-hey! What’s up, are you okay!?”

“Y-yes… Sorry, I’m fine. My legs trembled and I couldn’t stand anymore…”

Hearing her I finally noticed.

Hiiragi entire body was trembling a little.

“Haa… I wondered what would happen. I was so nervous thinking about why you called me here. I thought I might die…”

“… You were worrying about it that much?”

“… It’s your fault, you know, Hosono-kun.”

Hiiragi looked up at me resentfully.

However, maybe because she was relieved now, her expression was far more relaxed than earlier.

“If you weren’t so kind and a more disagreeable person, I wouldn’t feel like that, Hosono-kun…”

“… Yeah, my bad.”

Hiiragi used my hand and unsteadily stood up.

Then looking at the clock in the park,

“Aaah… It’s already this late. I rushed out of the house so Mom must be worried…”

“Must be, yeah, sorry… For now I’ll take you home.”

“Thank you.”

Still holding hands, we started to walk.

Her moist, sweaty hand was firmly grasping mine.

Looking at the pale moon shining in the night sky, I thought:

I guess that right now, this is the prologue of my story with Hiiragi.

──That’s why, my first love starts after the epilogue.

(15 Years Old/Hiiragi Tokoro – Machida Edition)

Epilogue

“And now, let’s talk about this book, ‘15 Years Old’! Only a month after its release, the book is so popular it’s starting to get difficult to find it in stores! Today, we asked Nonomura-san from Machida Edition to tell us what was appealing about the novel!”

An idol in charge of a variety show was smiling at the camera on the TV.

Half listening to the TV, I was trying my best to remove all of Shishamo’s hairs I could find on my clothes with tape.

“Aaah, geez! We’re meeting in five minutes!”

It happened just when I was going to go out after finishing to prepare myself.

For some reason Shishamo got into high spirits and jumped at me, covering my black jacket with white hairs.

I’m supposed to meet with the usual members after that. And there’s even a special guest this time.

Considering Hiiragi’s here, I can’t go with a disordered appearance.

And that’s why I was currently brushing my jacket with packing tape.

“Must be nice to be a novelist,” said my father with Shishamo now on his knee. “Just make a popular book and you can become billionaire in one go. Just with that and they don’t have to work again after that. Aaah, I’m so envious!”

“But I heard it’s not the same nowadays,” said my mother drinking tea next to him. “The recession touch every businesses.”

“But listen, they’re saying rather good things for the author.”

“This work is the sequel of ‘14 Years Old’. The popularity of ‘15 Years Old’ made the sales of the prequel go up,” said Nonomura-san with an innocent smile. **“The author, Hiiragi-sensei, is really happy about the success of her work. In fact, she’s even considering another sequel——”**

I could only listen until there. Now I have to go.

I threw away the packing tape I used, then picked up my bag on the floor.

I couldn’t take away everything, but I don’t have the time for more.

“Oh, you’re going out?” said my mother, finally noticing me. “When are you coming back? Will you eat dinner?”

“I don’t know how long i’ll be out! But I’ll come back before dinner!”

I run towards the entranceway.

“I’m off!”

I’m off.

During the last months, the number of times I said that other than when going to school considerably increased.

And that made a little happy.

□

“You’re late, Hosono!”

I arrived at our meeting place, the station.

As expected, everyone was already here.

Hiiragi was laughing, and Sudou was angry at me. Then newt to them was Shuuji, talking to *someone*.

“S-sorry, for being late…” I apologised, short of breath with my shoulders going up and down. “There was, a little accident… So I left home late…”

“Be more careful! Usually I wouldn’t mind, but today we have Asshi too!”

“… You’re right,” I said, straightening up.

Next to Shuuji was a girl with short black hair and dignified eyebrows.

She had a lean body and strong-willed eyes.

At first glance she looked like a handsome sportsman, but she was a girl named Ashiya Karen.

I didn’t see her since middle school.

“… Hey, been a while,” I said nervously.

“Wow! You really didn’t change at all!” Ashiya exclaimed, striking my back. “Still with your gloomy face! Really a wonder you could get you such a cute girlfriend with that face!”

Her voice was the same as the voice she had before I hurt her, so I felt relieved.

“… Well, a lot happened.”

“That’s what I heard,” Ashiya said, looking at both me and Hiiragi. “Still, well… I kinda get why. I had the hunch that you would find yourself a great girlfriend. Ah, by the way, got myself a boyfriend too when entering high school…!” she said bostafully.

Then Sudou cut in in high spirits:

“I saw a pic and he’s really good looking! I’m so jealous! I want to find love too~!”

“Yeah, yeah, stop here for now!” Shuuji, who was just watching until now, said with a wry smile. “We have all the time today, so first let’s go to a family restaurant then talk!”

“Oka~y.”

“You’re still such an honour student, Hiroo.”

We started moving as we talked.

□

“Ashiya-san is a funny person.”

We were on our way back.

As I was sending her back to her house, Hiiragi said that.

The evening sun was shining upon the residential area. Summer passed, and we could feel the lower temperature of autumn, but my right hand was feeling warmth from Hiiragi’s.

“She even know lots of interesting manga. I’m really eager to read what she recommended me…”

Unexpectedly, Hiiragi and Ashiya really hit it off with each other.

Their looks and personalities are different, but it seems that their inner maiden were alike. They got really excited talking about their tastes in manga.

… Well, during the conversation we talked about us. “You didn’t kiss yet!? You’re not grade schoolers, just do it!” she preached to us. I really regret talking to her about us.

“I want to go play with everyone again… Maybe I should be the one inviting next time…”

Hiiragi really changed.

Before, Hiiragi was just reading books alone, not getting closer to anyone.

Compared to that, now she could talk with someone she just met for hours.

And I was really happy about that.

I want to look at the changing Hiiragi. I want to find new charming points about her before anyone else.

“… Ah, I just remembered,” suddenly started Hiiragi. “My sister gave me an important message for you.”

“… Oh, what is it?”

Since then, I met Hiiragi Tokoro a few times.

When I went to give her my permission for “15 Years Old”, or when I participated to the party to celebrate the book publication at Hiiragi’s house.

Still… I wonder is that important message.

Having a strange premonition, I reflexively put myself on guard.

“You see… ‘15 Years Old’ is really popular, but many people want to the see side of the boy for who *Tokiko* fell for, let’s call him *Akira-kun*. They want to read the story from *Akira-kun*’s point of view.”

“… Ooooh, seriously?”

“It’s true that you could make a good story based on what happened from your side after all… And, well, my sister kinda got really enthusiastic about it…” Hiiragi smiled, looking at me, “So next time she would like you to help by doing a throughout interview, Hosono-kun.”

“… I see.”

I thought my knee were going to give up and make me fall.

Apparently, the story of what happened between me and Hiiragi wasn’t finished yet.

“… Oh well, I’ll help. But tell her there are some limits to not break.”

It’s her after all. I’m pretty sure she’s thoroughly going to ask things I don’t want to tell.

I don’t mind my experience being made into a novel, but it’d be scary to have everything revealed.

“Don’t worry,” Hiiragi laughed. “If she’s too persistent I’ll stop her.”

“… Thanks, counting on you.”

Hiiragi nodded, with a confident smile.

Finally, we arrived to her house. In front of the entranceway Hiiragi turned towards me.

“Well then, see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

As we were doing our usual exchange, I got a sudden idea.

Hiiragi was looking at me, smiling.

Her almond shaped eyes were looking at mine. Her skin looked smooth and white like soap.

And her thin lips moistened by cream.

Maybe, if I do it now.

If right now, I suddenly tried to advance our relationship, I wonder what kind of face she would do?

The moment this thought came to me, I couldn’t stop myself anymore.

My desire to know what would happen grew exponentially and I couldn’t take my eyes of Hiiragi.

When I took her hand, Hiiragi tilted her head to the side in wonder.

I took a deep breath, then I gradually brought my face closer to hers──.

Afterword

Based on the files information, I started to write this novel in… 2010 around autumn. It's already been 7 years, huh.

Hello, this is Masaki Saginomiya.

By the way, I lied a little. The date is for the prototype version of this story. Well, the characters and the events happening didn't really change, so you can say they're basically the same…

I applied to the 18th Dengeki Contest with this work but didn't manage to get past the preliminary, so to actually be able to publish it now after making my debut feels a little weird…

Looking back at the old manuscript's quality, it's no wonder it failed though…

A big difference in the old version is that the heroine was named Chiyoda Momose. Back then I had a "Chiyoda Momose Boom" and named all my heroines Chiyoda Momose. Then it finally ended when I won a prize during the 19th contest with "*Disappointed Love Detective Momose*".

Thinking about it, this work is a pretty important one to me, I guess. Being the first one in the "Momose Series". People who read the *Disappointed Love Detective* series must have noticed the similarities between Hiiragi and Momose.

Anyway, I decided to make this work in a different way than usual.

The theme was: Write something I'd like to read.

Of course, it was the case for every work I wrote. But usually I'd check what's trending in the market and take advice from my editor and create something while keeping them in mind.

But this time, I totally ignored them.

I just did what I wanted. The reason Hiten became the illustrator was also because I really wanted to have them do the illustrations.

And so, how was it? Did you enjoy it? If you did, that make us comrades!

To conclude, thank you very much for reading!

I hope I'll be able to see you all again in my next work!

Masaki Saginomiya

十四歳
終ところ

The Reader (Me), The Protagonist (Him) And Their Present

"… Why are you frowning like that?"

Today's our first day of school as second year students.

"I'm not frowning…" I answered Hosono-kun as I put my shoes in the shoe rack I'll use this year.

"Then what's the problem… Aren't we in the same class again this year?"

"That's true, but…"

"You would have liked to be in the same class as Sudou and Shuuji?"

"There is that too…"

"Then why are you looking all that gloomy for…"

… I guess I must be looking gloomy right now.

I've been sighing for a while, and talked less than usual.

I put my school slippers and went on the hallway with Hosono-kun.

"… I'm worried," I finally said, revealing what I was holding inside.

"You're… worried?"

"Yes, because of *that book*…" I said, looking at the white plastic bag in Hosono-kun's hand.

He just bought it at the bookstore in front of the station.

The title is “15 Years Old – Side A”.

It’s the novel made by my sister, Hiiragi Tokoro, with Hosono-kun as its protagonist.

The story which as been planned for almost a year finally released today.

“… What about it makes you worried?”

“… Because,” I stopped an instant thinking about how selfish my worry was, but then continued, “… reading about *Tokiko* made you like me, right, Hosono-kun?”

“… Y-yeah,” Hosono-kun answered surprised, looking away in embarrassment. “You’re right, but what’s your point…”

“In that case…” I started, holding his hand tightly, “Perhaps, by reading this novel… there’ll be a girl who will fall for you too…”

That was a future I really didn’t want to think about.

“… Huh?”

Hosono-kun stood still with a dumbfounded expression.

“What I want to say is… by reading this novel, there might be a girl who will empathise with *Akira-kun*… and then fall for you. That’s what worrying me…”

Because I’m his girlfriend, I understand really well.

He’s clumsy and a little unsociable, but he’s really kind.

I’m sure that his kindness will make the heart of many girls throb.

And just like Hosono-kun suddenly appeared before me, a girl might appear before him too.

Just thinking about it tighten my chest.

“… That’s impossible,” he said calmly. “The me in the novel is really uncool. There’s no way a girl would fall for me by reading it.”

“… You can’t know.”

“It’s alright. Even if such a girl existed it’s not like I’d be able to meet her by chance. So don’t worry about it,” he said walking ahead of me.

He got a lot more cheerful during the past year, but…

Even now, he’s still a little too blunt.

I sighed, following his back, when suddenly,

“… Oh, good morning.”

We came across a certain woman who came for the corner.

“Ah, Momo-chan… Sorry, Chiyoda-sensei…”

“… Good morning.”

“Yep, morning.”

This petite and cute woman wearing a suit was Chiyoda Momose-sensei.

She’s the homeroom teacher of another class of second years.

Also, she’s a friend of my sister.

That’s why, rather than a teacher, she was more of a sister-like acquaintance to us.

“… Did something happen?” she asked, maybe feeling something off from the way we acted. “Maybe you had a quarrel?”

“N-no, we didn’t…”

Then just as I answered, I noticed that Chiyoda-sensei had “15 Years Old – Side A” in her hand.

Looking at something I didn’t want to, I was at a loss for words.

“… Ah, I see,” Chiyoda-sensei smiled, seeming to have guessed what happened. “You’re worried… right, Hiiragi-san?”

“… Yes.”

Chiyoda-sensei smiled kindly hearing my honest answer.

She knows what happened between us last year.

I’m sure she was able to guess my uneasiness and Hosono-kun’s answer to it.

“I understand how you feel. Of course you would be worried if you like him…”

“… Yes.”

“Well then… Hosono-kun,” Chiyoda-sensei looked up at Hosono-kun face, “Don’t be so shy and just tell her what you think.”

“… Eh?”

“Well then, students are waiting for me. Later.”

Chiyoda-sensei went away leaving me and Hosno-kun who was dumbfounded.

A few seconds later, like a broken mechanical clock suddenly beginning to work, we started to walk too.

“… Hey,” I called out to Hosono-kun walking before me. “What are you thinking?”

“…”

“Chiyoda-sensei seems to have noticed something… What is it?”

Hosono-kun let out a big sigh.

“Well, it’s really alright. Even if there is a girl who fall for me and even if I happen to meet her by chance…”

“… Why?”

When I asked, Hosono-kun stopped and turned towards me.

Then acting calm while having his face completely red, he said:

“… Because the only one I like… is you, Hiiragi.”

Just hearing this.

Just looking at how he acts, his expression and the feelings they contain.

“… I see.”

Just like sugar melting in coffee, my uneasiness disappeared completely.

“… Thank you,” I said and went next to him once again.

Then, with the happiness now filling my body, I bumped gently against him.